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35. **The End**

Face Claims

[image]

Yang Yang as Hua Sheng

(Up Above)

The rest of the cast as their respective characters.

Chapter 1

Two children ran around their tolou, the only thing they could focus on was the constant *click clack* of their sticks on the ground and the distant chatter of the villagers, the mooing of the cows, and the occasional squawk of the stray chicken that they were chasing.

These sounds were merely background noise, they had learned to ignore the constant chatter of the villagers and the sounds of the animals. They had spent their 7 years listening to these noises. These sounds did nothing to distract Mulan and Sheng. They were too focused with the task on hand. Catching the stray chicken. It sounded like quite an easy task but it was far from it, they had been chasing this stray chicken for an hour, not giving up easily.

Sweat dotted both of their foreheads as they ran back and forth, smacking their wooden sticks on the ground to get the chicken's attention. While Hua Zhou seemed tired of the task, Mulan and Sheng loved it, they had always loved a challenge and running after the stray chicken was certainly one.

"Steady Mulan, Sheng" their father's voice called out.

People had always seemed intimidated by their father, he was one a mighty warrior, he held his head high and pushed his chest out, like a warrior but he grew more and more fragile with age, his shoulders slightly slumped and his chest a bit withdrawn.

Mulan had always been the wild child. She enjoyed doing Sheng's tasks more than her own. She was supposed to be practicing her weaving while Sheng was to be helping his father with herding the chickens but she instead joined Sheng, abandoning her task. Her father paid no mind to it, always letting Mulan help with task that were considered "boyish."

For a moment, it seemed that their task was done. Mulan and Sheng

watched as their father herded the chicken into the coop, giving each other bright smiles. Mulan and Sheng noticed that one chicken had strayed away from the coop, wandering away. Mulan and Sheng's faces contorted into ones of determination. They quietly slipped away and stalked the chicken.

Sheng recalled the tale of the Turtle and the Hare. "Slow and steady wins the race" he whispered but Mulan had other plans. She took after the chicken, chasing it around the courtyard. Sheng sighed and then smiled, chasing after Mulan.

"Sheng! Mulan! Forget the chicken!" their father shouted but they paid no mind to his shouts. They only had one thing in their mind and that was to catch the chicken.

Sheng and Mulan chased after the chicken in the shrine, knocking a fruit bowl down. Mulan leapt in the air and placed her foot on the Phoenix's wing, causing a loud *CRACK!* as the wing broke off the phoenix. Sheng skidded to a stop and gasped, staring at the phoenix which now only had one wing. He sighed and chased after his sister, beginning the hunt with the chicken once more.

He reached the second floor, the floor in which Mulan was on. He exhaled as he caught sight of his mother, who was holding Xiu at her side.

"Mulan! Take control of yourself!" his mother shouted, accompanied by his sister, Hua Xiu. Sheng winced at the sound of his mother's voice, knowing that she would be furious at Mulan after.

Mulan's pace slowed and for a second, Sheng thought that she would listen to their mother but just as quickly, she picked up her original pace and chased after the chicken. The end of the balcony came near but she didn't slow. She stopped and climbed onto the railing, gripping the roof and throwing her leg over one side of the roof, successfully climbing up it. Sheng followed after her, peering up onto the roof as he stood on the railing, shaking his head and smiling as Mulan began her chase once more. He did not dare to look at the villager's faces, knowing that they would express their disapproval and disappointment.

The chicken came to a stop and lowered itself to the ground below. Sheng softly chuckled. Mulan watched with satisfaction, nodding to her father as he slammed the gate shut, trapping the chicken inside. Sheng let out a sigh of relief, seeing that the chase was done.

"Mulan, listen very carefully. You will take a calming breath, and then slowly-*slowly*-you will climb down."

Her eyes didn't stray from the coop and Hua Zhou sighed. "*Climb*," he repeated. "Do you understand?"

Mulan didn't reply and Sheng was beginning to get worried, what was she possibly thinking. That was the most frustrating part about his sister. She was *so* unpredictable.

"Yes," she said.

Sheng exhaled and kept his gaze trained on Mulan, watching her every move.

Their father started to smile but his face soon contorted into a look of horror as Mulan took a tiny step forward, slipping on their tolou's roof. Sheng could only watch with his eyes wide in horror as she fell. It seemed as if he was in slow-motion, slowly he ran, leaping from the railing and flipping down onto the ground, smacking his wooden stick on the ground below Mulan and raising his arms, preparing to catch her.

He could only watch as she twisted her body and stuck her wooden stick in the crack of a roof, letting go of the stick, using it to catch her fall and sliding on a shed roof jumping off and landing on the ground, catching her stick and doing a series of moves in her hand before sticking a hand out in front of her, smiling at their father.

Their father's look held pride, sharing a look at both of them but quickly contorted into disappointment as he looked at Mulan once more as he quickly walked away. Mulan's smile fell. She had disappointed him. Sheng gave her a look of sympathy and then threw his arm around her shoulder, leading them back to their house.

Sheng watched as Mulan absentmindedly brushed their sister's long black hair. Sheng could tell that she was hurt from the moment before, even he couldn't get the look of his father's disappointment out of his head. It made him shiver, he could only imagine what Mulan was feeling now.

"Mulan, Sheng" their sister's quiet voice said, breaking the comfortable silence. "What happened on the roof?"

"I was chasing that naughty chicken," she replied.

"No," she pushed. "When you *slipped.* For a moment it was like you were a bird...." she exclaimed, her voice trailing off.

"I could agree with that," Sheng said, causing Mulan to glare at him.

"Xiu," Mulan whispered in the girl's ear "Don't panic but there's a spider crawling in your hair."

"You know I'm afraid of spiders," Xiu said, biting her lower lip. "This isn't one of your tricks, is it Mulan?"

Sheng could tell that Mulan was trying not to smile, he chuckled and decided that he would tease Xiu even further.

"Don't move." he whispered "If you hold very still, I will *squash it*..." His voice lowered as he heard his mother's voice increase in volume.

"You indulge her," Li said.

Sheng, Xiu and Mulan all paused to listen to the conversation.

"There's no harm in herding chickens," Zhou said firmly.

"You know I'm not talking about chickens," she said. "I'm talking about her. Her bold spirit. We can't encourage it."

"Mulan is young," Zhou countered. "She is still to control herself."

Sheng patted Mulan's shoulder, seeing her obvious discomfort. He kept his hand on her shoulder, providing her some comfort.

"You make excuses for her!" Li said, her voice strained. "You forget that Mulan is a *daughter,* not a son. A daughter brings honor through marriage."

Sheng bit his lip at his mother's words. He knew that they would affect Mulan and he leaned his head on her shoulder, rubbing circles on her back, providing her more comfort.

"Any man would be fortunate to marry our daughter," Hua Zhou said.

"Xiu gives me no trouble. The Matchmaker will find a good husband for her. Sheng engages in his studies and trains for the battlefield"

Sheng sighed once more, he could picture the frown on his mother's face and her disappointment in Mulan.

"It is Mulan I worry about. Always Mulan." Hua Li paused, her voice growing into a whisper. "I just don't know where Mulan fits in this world.

Mulan let out a shaky breath and Sheng pulled her in for a tight hug, knowing that she needed him right now.

"You'll find your place Mulan" he whispered, he felt her clutch onto him tighter.

"She doesn't mean it," Xiu said. "Tell me about the spider.

"There is no spider," Mulan grumbled. Sheng could tell that their mother's words had affected her.

"How many legs does it have?" Xiu said, ignoring her sister's words.

Mulan sighed. "You know spiders have eight legs," she said.

"It's not black, is it?" Xiu said, looking frightened.

Sheng let out a laugh, causing a small smile to graze Mulan's face but it quickly turned back into a frown.

Mulan slowly nodded after a while. "Yes, it is black. With red spots,"

she said. "And I'm sorry to say that it's unusually hairy," she paused, creating suspense. "And it's crawling towards your *neck* right now!" She reached out her fingers, running them up and down Xiu's neck.

In response, Xiu shrieked, causing a wide smile to form on Sheng's and Mulan's lips.

Sheng tossed and turned in his bed, unable to fall asleep. He sighed and got up, looking out the window, spotting Mulan trying to fix the wing on the Phoenix.

"Need help with that," he said softly, startling the young girl. Her head snapped towards him, her posture stiff but soon relaxed as she saw it was just Sheng. Sheng and Mulan grabbed the Phoenix's wing, coating it in a bit more paste before placing the wing onto the Phoenix. They waited for the paste to dry, their fingers turning white from the pressure they were putting on the Phoenix.

Hearing footsteps, they kept their gazes on the Phoenix. A moment later, they felt their father's presence besides them.

"Mulan, Sheng" Zhou said. "What happened today, I never want to see happen again." He stared at Mulan, when she didn't meet his gaze. He placed a finger under her chin, lifting her head.

"Do you understand?" he asked

Sheng watched as Mulan nodded, causing her father to smile but he could still see the lingering disappointment in his eyes, causing him to look away. They focused their gazes back on the Phoenix, watching as the wing slowly slid off.

Sheng watched helplessly as Mulan's eyes filled with tears. Without speaking, Hua Zhou picked up the wing of the Phoenix and pressed it back onto the statue with some difficulty.

"Do you know why the Phoenix sits at the right hand of the Emperor?" he asked. "She is his guardian. His protector."

"But I broke her," Mulan whispered.

"Ah, but did you know that she is half male and half female? She is

both beautiful and strong." He looked into her eyes, his eyes no longer containing disappointment. "Failure is not fatal Mulan. This is the lesson of the Phoenix. What matters is that you rise up and continue. The Phoenix will watch over you. That's her job, *Your* job is to bring honor to the family. Do you think you can do that?"

"But-" Sheng said. His father hushed him, Sheng knew what this meant. No more chasing chickens with his sister, it would be his job to chase them alone. As they walked away, the Phoenix's wing slowly slid from its body, clattering to the ground.

Sheng sighed, taking one last look at the broken phoenix. Mulan would have to hide her gift away and he would have to train his gift and then bring honor on the battlefield.

Chapter 2

As the days passed, the house grew quieter and quieter. His sister no longer chasing the chickens with him or kicking the ball back to him and the boys inside their tolou. He knew Mulan still had the urge to play ball or chase the chickens.

He let out a laugh, remembering the time Mulan kicked the ball too hard towards them and knocked the head of the Phoenix statue off, or the time she rode Black Wind through their neighbors laundry.

As the years passed, Mulan seemed to settle down. Sheng missed the wild side of his sister, who would chase the chickens and kick the ball back to them. By the age of 16, Sheng had grown into a young man, gaining muscle and height, looking more like his father every day. Mulan had grown into a tall, lithe and beautiful girl. But every so often, Mulan's wild side would come out and she would join her brother, Sheng, in chasing the chickens.

Sheng's forehead was beaded with sweat as he swung his wooden stick, training his chi. He smiled as he saw Mulan return from riding Black Wind, a smile on her beautiful face. He ran towards the entrance of their tolou, catching up with Black Wind and Mulan. He waited as she dismounted Black Wind.

"You know you're late right?" he said, a smile adorning his pale face.

"Could say the same" she said softly, smiling and running towards their home.

Sheng followed after Mulan, following her into their home and grabbing a plate and sitting besides his father.

"Black Wind and I rode alongside two rabbit running side by side," she said, picking up some rice and placing it in her bowl. "I think one was male and one was female . . ."

Sheng watched her talk about her ride eagerly, he had always loved listening to what she saw but his smile soon turned into a frown as it was eerily silent. Had Mulan done something? Was something wrong?

They both watched as their mother nervously wrung her hands, their eyes narrowed as they saw she was nervous.

"What is it?" Mulan pressed.

"We have excellent news," Li said, her shaky voice betraying her. "The Matchmaker has found you an auspicious match."

Sheng choked on his food and placed his chopsticks back on his plate, he saw Mulan's face visibly pale. He sucked in a breath and exhaled, he knew that Mulan's worst fear was to be married off. He knew that she was thrilled that the days went by without any news from the Matchmaker but now Mulan's worst fear had come true.

Sheng noticed Mulan looking at her father for help but her father's gaze did not falter. "

"Your father and I have spoken about this."

"But-" Mulan cut in.

Sheng's heart broke for the girl. He sighed and lowered his gaze, playing with his rice.

"It is what's best for our family."

Sheng watched as Mulan slowly walked to the table, seeming to be in some sort of trance. She sat down and took a deep breath, nodding.

"Yes, it is what's best. I will bring honor to us all."

Sheng's breath caught in his throat, he stared at Mulan, looking at

her, his eyes only filled with sympathy.

Sheng did not join the regular family conversations, instead, keeping his gaze fixed on Mulan, watching her as she sat there, lost in her thoughts.

Sorry, this wasn't a very long chapter, more of a filler chapter.

- Ashton

Chapter 3

Sheng found himself waiting outside with his father, both of them eager to see Mulan, who was getting prepared for the Matchmaker with her mother. He grimaced at the thought of meeting the Matchmaker one day. He knew that he would eventually have to start a family with his match but he never thought the day would come so soon for Mulan.

He sighed, holding pity for the girl. He knew that she was thrilled when the days went by with no news from the ragged old woman but it was too good to be true. Deep down, they both knew that they would be matched one day and they both knew that they were dreading it. It fell heavily on their shoulders, if they chose what they wanted, they would dishonor the Hua family but it the cost was being unhappy but bringing honor to the family. Sheng would have to chose unhappiness. He couldn't bear the thought of dishonoring the Hua family. It was too painful.

He brought himself back to the present, leaning against a pole while awaiting the arrival of Mulan, who would be in makeup and in an elegant dress.

"That would be a first" he mumbled, shortly laughing to himself.

Sheng looked up at a window, catching Mulan's gaze. He gave her a small smile, knowing the discomfort she must be in right now. He saw her gaze shift to Black Wind, knowing that she was likely considering jumping on his back and riding off into the sunset.

Soon he caught sight of his mother and Mulan, accompanied by his sister Xiu. He sent her an encouraging smile but it was met with a blank gaze. He lowered his head, his pity increasing for Mulan. He held sadness in his eyes for the girl, knowing that her real self was hidden under a pile of makeup and an elegant dress. This wasn't Mulan, she wasn't herself. He clenched his fist at the thought.

Sheng smiled as his mother and Mulan walked by. He sent her a curt nod. "I am truly blessed to be in the presence of such enchanting woman."

His father cut in. "I have no doubt that today will be a momentous day for the Hua family."

"Never mind that," his mother cut in."We must be on time."

Sheng watched on as Mulan struggled to keep up with the woman. He sighed once more, tearing his gaze away from Mulan.

"I'm starving" he heard Mulan say in the distance, causing his booming laughter to break out once more, clearing his throat when he noticed the people's stares.

Sheng watched as they made their way to the Matchmaker's house, following behind his father Hua Zhou. They stood outside the door, waiting for the meeting to end.

Sheng looked at the house, startled as he heard bangs coming from inside. He walked forward, only to be stopped by his father who blocked his path by holding his arm out.

His father took a deep breath. "You can't interfere with the meeting Sheng. It will only bring humiliation with it, it is best if we let fate move things along." He said in a soft whisper, calming Sheng. Sheng looked at him and sighed, going back to leaning against the wooden pillar.

He watched as Mulan left the Matchmaker's house, frowning as he saw her hairdo undone. The Matchmaker walked over, leaning on the balcony and shouting for all of the village to hear.

"Dishonor on the Hua family" she screamed. "They have failed to raise a good daughter!"

A unseen rage filled Sheng and he grabbed Mulan and pulled her closely to his side, hearing her small gasp as she felt the anger radiating off of him.

"Don't listen to her Mulan" he murmured in her ear, still holding her

closely to his side as they walked down the stairs and got to the ground level.

The sound of drumbeats echoed throughout the village. The whole village stopped to watch the soldiers enter their tolou, whispering at the sight.

"Citizens! Citizens! Citizens!" the magistrate shouted, as if he already didn't have their attention. "We are under attack from northern invaders. Our land is at war! By edict of His Imperial Majesty, the Son of Heaven, every family must contribute one man to fight! One man from every house!"

He pulled out a scroll and unraveled it, the inscription on it read a list of names.

"Wang family! Chin family! Du family!" he said.

"Hua family!"

It was as if his world had collapsed around him, his breath caught in his throat and he could only stare wide-eyed. The words echoed in his head, repeating over and over again. He took a step forward but was yanked back by his mother, he soon saw his father, who was walking forward.

Their father bowed. "I am Hua Zhou, I served the Imperial Army in the last battle against the Northern Invaders."

The magistrate stared down at him from atop his horse. "Have you no son old enough to fight?" he asked.

"I am blessed with two daughters and a son who has not come of age," he answered, looking up at the magistrate. "I will fight."

It all seemed in slow motion as their father reached to accept the scroll, his fingers barely touching the parchment before his leg gave out on him, sending him tumbling to the ground. Sheng and Mulan both moved forward to help their father but their mother held them back.

"You must not interfere, you will only humiliate him further."

He saw as the magistrate gave their father a look of pity and even the soldiers seemed embarrassed for him, Hua Sheng sighed, averting his gaze.

Hua Zhou grabbed the scroll, denying the soldier's offer of his hand, he painfully got up and limped away, his head still held high.

Mulan and Sheng watched him go, sparing a glance at one another. They both knew what would happen. Their father was going to go to war and most likely be killed. He was a good man, a proud man and it was his pride that was going to get him killed on the battlefield.

Sheng lowered his gaze, pressing his lips tightly together. He looked at Mulan and sent her a reassuring smile but even he could tell that she saw right through him. He sighed and wrapped his arm around her waist, holding her tightly against his hip. He led her back to the house, both of them embraced in a comfortable silence and engrossed in their thoughts, knowing that they didn't have to use words to express what they felt. They knew what was going to happen.

Chapter 4

[image]

Sheng sat at the dinner table, replaying the events that happened a few hours ago. They couldn't ignore the events that happened a few hours ago. The family was now seated at the dinner table, sitting in an awkward silence and tension hanging in the air.

Sheng picked at his rice aimlessly with his chopsticks, occasionally glancing at Mulan, who was doing the same. His mother hadn't even grabbed a plate, fixing her gaze on Zhou. His father ate and carried on as if the events hadn't happened.

"You're a war hero," Li said, breaking the silence. You've already made great sacrifices-"

His father cut her off. "Are you suggesting our family not comply with the Imperial edict?"

"But how can you fight when you barely-"

Their father slammed their fist onto the table, causing Sheng to snap his gaze towards their father. Sheng looked on shocked at his outburst. He had always been a calm and humble man who prided himself on restraint. This outburst was unlike him- and it was frightening.

"I am the father," he said, his voice booming through the small room. "It is my place to bring honor to our family on the battlefield. You are the daughter." He paused, his eyes boring into Mulan. *"Learn your place!"* Hua Zhou pushed himself to his feet, walking out the door and slamming it hard behind him.

Sheng lowered his gaze, a pit forming in his stomach. He looked at Mulan and grabbed her hand, squeezing it gently. She sent him a small nod but it did not convince Sheng. He was always her greatest supporter, always encouraging her to be who she was. She always

believed that her father knew she could be more, wanted more. But she had been wrong.

Li walked over and grabbed Mulan and Sheng's hands. "We must be strong," she paused, her eyes welling and hands shaking. "This time he will not return," she said her voice cracking and a teardrop falling from her eye.

Soon night had come and Sheng was restless, staring up at the ceiling. He heard the small squeak of a cabinet coming from downstairs, he quickly jumped out of his bed, tiptoeing around the dining room and down the stairs.

Sheng peeked around the corner and his mouth slightly hung open at the sight. Mulan was standing there but in her hands was their father's sword, which he had forbidden them to touch. He watched as she tucked the armor under her arms and carried the sword with her other hand. He silently followed her, watching her gaze at their family sleeping. His eyes widened as he realized what she was going to do. She was going to take their father's place.

He followed her outside, watching her put on the armor and hang the sword off of her side. He slowly walked toward her, he grabbed her arm and spun her around. Watching her eyes widened as she had been caught.

"Mulan, what do you think you're doing?"

"Taking his place" she whispered.

"I'll let you go but only if I can come with you."

Her eyes widened and she shook her head, staring up at him.

"You're going to die!" she shouted but quickly clasped a hand over her mouth.

"You have a chance of dying too, it's best if I go with you or else you're not going at all," he threatened.

She sighed and nodded, he gave her a nod and walked over to his neighbor's horse. He sighed and looked up at the horse.

"Hey buddy" he whispered.

He sighed once more and jumped up on the horse's back, stroking it's mane, successfully calming down. He looked at Mulan and nodded. He clicked his tongue, urging the horse forward. He took one last glance at the house, a wave of love washing over him. He knew that this might be the last time he would see his family, he wished to say goodbye but knew that was not possible. He tore his gaze from the house, riding away with Mulan off into the night.

Sorry this was a short chapter, I will update the Stranger Things story soon.

-Ashton

Chapter 5

Sheng was tired. Tired and Hungry. His body ached from the long hours that he had been seated upon his stolen horse. He gazed at Mulan, seeing her adorning their father's armor. She looked like a man. It was a weird sight for Sheng to say the least. His sister would now become his brother. Words that he thought he would never say in his life but here he was, sitting with his sister, who now was his brother, riding towards a military camp where they would be trained to become soldiers.

He nudged his horse forward, seeing Mulan riding ahead of him. She dismounted Black Wind, sending Sheng a small smile. He returned it with a smile of his own.

"We should rest" she said softly.

He nodded, dismounting his own horse and laying down his makeshift bed. He laid on the ground, gazing up at the stars. He sighed, remembering how he gazed up at the same stars, wishing for some sort of adventure but now that the adventure had come, he wished nothing more to return home to his family and cuddle up in his own bed. He missed home.

He shifted his gaze to Mulan, who now was snoring softly, her mouth hanging slightly open and her eyes closed. He smiled, getting up out of his bed and walking over to her, kneeling down on the hard ground and placing a soft kiss on her forehead.

"Sleep well Mulan" he whispered.

He walked back to his bed, gazing at Mulan one last time before flipping on his side, turning his gaze away from her.

"What have I gotten myself into" he murmured to himself.

He let his heavy eyelids fall shut, letting darkness consume him.

Sheng sat by their fire, warming his hands along with Mulan. He watched as the fire crackled, the bright orange flames dancing around.

Mulan groaned, Sheng watching as she pulled off their father's boots, wincing as he saw her feet. They were covered with blisters, some new and some old. She reached into her bag, pulling out only one apple.

"Our last apple" she said, splitting the apple into two pieces and handing one to Sheng who proceeded to feed his horse.

"Maybe if we beg for forgiveness, our family will take us back . . ." he joked, smiling slightly as he saw an amused smile grace Mulan's face.

Sheng groaned as the sun beat down on his face, he gazed up at the sky, his mouth opening in amazement.

"The Phoenix" Mulan exclaimed, smiling as widely as him.

"Our protector" he whispered, smiling widely.

Chapter 6

Sheng and Mulan soon arrived at encampment, walking towards the entrance. Sheng watched with a grin on his face as Mulan gazed around the camp in amazement yet worry. They came to a sudden halt, taking their place in line. Sheng tapped his foot impatiently, looking around at his surroundings.

Ahead of them were two young men about their age. One of them was chubby, his cheeks red. He looked uncomfortable and a bit awkward. Besides him was a taller conscript, lean and tall. Soon, a young man cut in front of them, ignoring Mulan's grunt of protest. A long weed hung from his mouth, taking it out, he tickled the boy's ear.

"I'm Cricket"

"Longwei" the lean conscript replied.

The boy nodded. "My mother said I was born-"

He paused, lifting his hand to swat away the weed that was tickling his ear.

The young man bit back a laugh. Another conscript joined him, beckoning him to do it again.

Sheng watched Mulan, seeing her eyes narrowed at the men. He sighed, she was unaware to the world of men, sadly, this is just what men do to each other.

Cricket continued talking. His voice carefree and happy. "She said I was born under an auspicious-"

He paused again. The tickling had become more aggressive and he swatted harder this time. Instead of slapping the bug, he slapped

Longwei.

"Ow" Longwei shouted, placing a hand on his cheek.

The bullies howled with laughter. They pushed Cricket and Longwei out of the way, they took their place in line. The younger conscripts stumbled against each other, desperately trying to keep their balance.

Sheng watched as Mulan was sent tumbling to the ground. He took a step forward but stopped in his tracks, seeing as a man had his hand offered out to Mulan. The young man was tall, lean and very handsome, his eyes twinkling and kind. He saw Mulan holding back a blush, causing him to cough awkwardly, covering his howl of laughter.

Sheng watched on in confusion as she quickly slapped his hand away, unsheathing her sword in one quick motion. She placed the sword at the tip of his throat.

"Insult me again," she said, her voice deep and gruff, "and you'll taste the tip of my blade."

All humor had left the man's face and with one quick motion, he had his sword to her throat as well.

Sheng watched with wide eyes, debating whether to intervene. Mulan was already drawing attention to herself, something they both didn't need.

"Lower your sword," the young man said, his face serious.

"Or what?" Mulan pushed.

Sheng watched the bullies, their eyes staring at Mulan and the young man.

"Honghui" they whispered.

Sheng watched as a man approached Mulan and Honghui. His face serious and determined, he held his shoulders high and his chest out. He was definitely a soldier, an experienced one, his face lined

with experience and age.

Before Sheng could blink, Mulan's arm was twisted behind her back. Her sword soon removed from her hand and her hand dropped to the side. Next to her, Honghui rubbed his arm, his eyes trained on his own weapon.

"I am your commanding officer-Commander Tung!" the man shouted. "Fighting will not be tolerated. Am I clear?" He stated, his tone icy and firm.

"Yes Commander," Honghui replied immediately.

Commander Tung turned to Mulan and repeated the question.

"Yes Commander" she said.

Commander Tung handed back Honghui his sword. He looked at Mulan's sword, recognition flashing over his face. He looked at Mulan with hidden interest.

"What's your name, soldier?" he asked.

"Hua Jun, Commander" she said, the lie easily rolling off her tongue.

"Is this your family's sword" he questioned.

She nodded. "It belongs to our father, Hua Zhou" she said.

His eyes flickered over to Sheng's face, recognition flashing over his face once again.

"What is your name, soldier" he questioned.

Sheng cleared his throat. "Hua Sheng, Commander. Brother of Hua Jun" he said, pointing towards Mulan.

He looked Sheng up and down, causing Sheng to fidget with his hands worriedly. "Get yourself some armor, training clothes and a sword."

"Yes Commander" Sheng replied, letting out a sigh of relief.

Sheng and Mulan watched him go, both of them sucking in a breath of air and letting out a sigh of relief. They both walked towards the clothing tent, lost in thought. They would get the right clothes and then would think about the mess that had happened. They had been so caught up in worry about surviving the war that they hadn't even thought about surviving boot camp.

Sheng sighed and looked towards Mulan, sending her a small grin. They had already made an enemy. He walked over to her, grinning widely, his grin growing as he saw the confusion on her face.

"First Fight!" he cheered quietly.

She rolled her eyes in annoyance but an amused smile graced her face. He smiled, picking up his pace towards the clothing tent.

Chapter 7

[image]

Sheng soon was geared up with training clothes, a sword and armor. He sat outside the tent, patiently waiting for Mulan who was still trying on clothes. He sighed, humming a soft tune to himself.

He sat there for a while before unsheathing his sword from it's scabbard, admiring it. It was a lightweight sword, easy to handle. The grip was a hard leather, smooth and strong. On the end of the hilt was an openwork pommel with a tassel looped through the pommel, similar to their family sword. The blade was straight, thin and flexible. It appeared to be made of a strong forged steel, having a shiny exterior. It was a sword fit for a mighty warrior, one that Sheng hoped he could become. His scabbard was plain with a few simple golden designs, not as exquisite as their father's scabbard.

He sighed, tearing his gaze away from his beautiful sword. It had become close to night and he was still waiting there for Mulan. It should be expected though. How would small Mulan fit in clothes meant for men.

He closed his eyes, enjoying the blissful silence and the cold night.

By the time he opened his eyes, it was now night and Mulan had left the tent, making her way towards him. He let out a sigh of relief, finally being able to walk around. He walked towards her, stretching his legs, wincing when they cracked.

"Sorry for taking so long" she said, breaking the silence.

"It's nothing" he said.

"It's just what twin brother do" he said, grinning at her.

She sighed and lowered her head. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"How could I not" he exclaimed. "I'm getting to spend some time with my *baby brother*" he replied, emphasizing the words baby brother. She groaned, her face twisting in frustration.

"I'm risking dishonor to the Hua name. I'm going off to fight in a battle where..." she paused, not finishing the sentence.

Sheng's expression turned serious. "I know. That's why I came with you. If we do something, we do it together" he said, his eyes boring into hers.

As they walked along, searching for their tent. Their noses wrinkled at the smell surrounding them. Sweat, unwashed clothes, and under cooked meat. Even as hungry as he was, Sheng did not find the smell fueling his appetite, instead, it made him queasy. Sheng began to think of home, the nice meals his mother would cook. He wished desperately to return, even if he had to train his chi while his father would watch, his gaze full of love and pride.

Shaking his head, he pushed away the thoughts of home and his father. It would not do well to dwell on his past and think of those thoughts, they would only make him desperate to return home.

He smiled as he spotted their assigned tent, Mulan pulling him along. Immediately, he wished he hadn't entered with her. In front of them, men were joking and laughing with each other. Undressed. He wished he could sweep Mulan away and take her home but instead he could only watch in horror as she looked around, her face red.

Keeping their eyes down, they made their way through the tent. Other then the soldiers, the tent was empty, the only furniture occupying the space being their sleeping platforms. Spotting two sleeping platforms, Sheng pulled Mulan along but stopped in his tracks, a man bumping into her. Sheng turned his gaze toward the man, holding back a groan as he realized that it was Cricket and with him was Longwei.

Before any of them could talk, the larger conscript that had been

bullying them earlier appeared, a huge smile spreading across his face, looking towards Longwei and Cricket. He grabbed both of them in a headlock and pulled them towards the rowdy conscripts.

He followed Mulan as she walked towards the sleeping platforms, his eyes narrowing as he saw her gaze lock on Honghui. His eyes darkened as he saw Honghui lock eyes with Mulan, his expression turning into one of disdain.

Sheng watched as Mulan opened her mouth to say something to Honghui but before she had the chance, a booming voice broke through the ruckus.

"I told you to line up for showers!" he said, his tone angry.

"Shower?" Mulan and Sheng repeated, panic flooding through them both.

Sergeant Qiang nodded. "Showers! You lot stink!"

As Sheng and other conscripts lined up, eager to wash the stink off themselves. Mulan fidgeted with her armor. She couldn't take a shower. Her secret would be revealed and they would be in serious trouble.

"And I need a volunteer for night guard duty-"

Mulan's hand shot up in the air. "Me!" she said, her voice too eager for the mundane task. "I mean, I volunteer, sir."

Sheng let out a sigh of relief, his shoulders relaxing.

"Better keep an eye out," Honghui warned, not sounding concerned.

Po nodded."Those northern invaders eat tadpoles," he added.

Sheng gave them a heated glare, biting back a snarky comeback. He couldn't let them see his anger, doing so would only fuel their satisfaction.

Sheng watched them go, sending Mulan a reassuring glance. She

was on the first line of defense against the invaders, causing worry to bubble in Sheng's stomach. He sent her one last glance, making his way towards the showers, his thoughts running wild with worry for Mulan.

He bit his lip. "How are we going to do this Mulan" he whispered. "I'll make sure we make it home" he added, reassuring himself.

Chapter 8

"Stealing! Penalty: death!"

Sergeant Qiang's voice rang over the parade ground in the center of encampment. Morning had come far too quickly for Sheng's liking. They all had been awakened by the sergeant's loud booming voice echoing through the tent, ordering everyone outside for the morning announcements. Luckily, in the chaos that followed, Sheng watched as Mulan was able to slink towards the back of the tent and successfully got dressed without anyone noticing her female-shaped exterior.

Now Sheng stood shoulder to shoulder with Mulan, along with hundreds of other conscripts and seasoned soldiers as the sergeant's loud voice barked the list of rules and punishments for breaking them. Beside him, Commander Tung stood, his eyes flickering over the men gathered in front of him.

"Desertion!" Sergeant Qiang continued. "Penalty: death!"

The men listened, their faces somber and focus. Even Yao knew not to joke.

"Bringing women into camp or consorting with women in any way," the sergeant continued. "Penalty: death."

Sheng struggled to keep the panic and fear from his face. He felt as though everyone was looking at him and Mulan, even though he knew this was not the case. Still, Sergeant Qiang's words made her fear increase and made them feel that much more real. He had known that there would be a penalty for bringing a women in the army, but death? That was a bit . . . aggressive.

As if reading Sheng's thoughts, Sergeant Qiang finished his speech. "Dishonesty? Penalty . . . "

He paused, letting the word hang in the air for a moment before

finishing. "Expulsion! Disgrace" The conscripts gasped. Sergeant Qiang nodded. "Disgrace for you, disgrace for your family, disgrace for your village . . . disgrace for your country."

From the looks on the faces of the men and Mulan around him, and the way they all shifted uncomfortably on their feet, Sheng knew they were thinking his exact thoughts. Disgrace was a far worse punishment then death.

Sheng could have sworn Sergeant Qiang looked happier to have made the soldiers nervous. Marching in front of them, he stopped, slamming his finger into the chest of the nearest conscript.

"We're going to make men out of every single one of you!"

As the parade ground erupted with cheers, Sheng lifted his hand and let out a happy cry but upon seeing Mulan's look of fear, he lowered his hand and placed it comfortably on her shoulder, sending her a small smile, but, it did not stop the fear on the inside. What would they do if Mulan was revealed? They couldn't avoid it forever? Would she fall in the first battle or be revealed and have both of them face the punishment? He flinched at the thought but quickly regained composure.

He nudged Mulan lightly, bringing his lips closely to her ear. "I think they'll make a man out of even you. Mulan."

Her shoulders relaxed but still remained tense. She nudged his shoulder lightly in a teasing manner. "I could say the same."

He placed a hand over his heart, faking offense. "Me. Why wouldn't they?"

Sheng and Mulan smiled brightly, both of them wearing huge smiles on their faces, causing some of the conscripts to look at them weirdly. Sheng draped his arm around her shoulder, leading her back to the tent. Both of them chatting away, forgetting about the punishments they could face, their only thoughts about each other, grinning and laughing.

"Well," Sheng sighed. "It was good to spend some 'Sibling on Sibling'

time," he said, flopping down on his bed. Mulan laid right next to him, staring at the ceiling of the tent and smiling before looking at him, their eyes boring into each other's.

"I could say the same" she whispered.

Chapter 9

Sheng was tired. After their morning announcement, they had been sent out into the middle of the parade grounds to begin their basic. For hours, Sheng, Mulan and the other men, if you could call them that, had been practicing the same basic martial arts maneuvers, over and over again. Using only their arms, legs and body, they were supposed to defend themselves with minimal effort. Sheng's arms ached from swinging through the air, and he was sure he heard his shoulder pop out of place as he threw a strong punch. But Sheng didn't let the pain get to him. As other soldiers fell to the ground in exhaustion. Sheng and Mulan kept going, a friendly competitive aura surrounding them. Sheng felt Commander Tung's eyes on him and Mulan and it fueled his determination. At one point, Sheng's body had gone numb, and his limbs moved as if they were pulled by strings. It reminded Sheng of being in the village, watching Xiu and Mulan practice weaving on the loom, the actions of theirs becoming so routine that their minds could wander.

Now, Sheng couldn't afford to let his thoughts drift and distract him from the task presented to him. He soon heard Sergeant Qiang's booming voice fill the grounds, yelling at Mulan to redo the move, causing a smile to bloom on his face. Satisfied, Sheng watched as the Sergeant moved on to torment another conscript. Honghui.

Honghui's moves were fresh, his face still focused. Cricket and Longwei were not faring well. Both were panting, their faces red and sweat pouring from their brows. Another competitive wave washed over and he felt fresh energy infuse his aching body. He wasn't going to let Mulan or Honghui beat him. Physically for Mulan, but, he sure as hell wasn't going to let Honghui beat him mentally or physically.

As the day progressed, the conscripts were moved from one part of the camp to another. They spent time in the archery range, shooting arrows at the line of wicker targets set up on the hill. At the sergeant's order, the soldiers would notch their arrows and raise

their bows. Then, they would release the arrows, sending it towards the target. Sheng focused, his eyes steady on the target. But it didn't seem to matter. Each time his arrow was sent flying, it missed the target only by a bit. Luckily, the others were having seemed to be having trouble too. Mulan's came up short. Honghui's arrows flew wide while Po kept breaking the bowstring. Only Cricket, ironically, had enough luck. Pulling back his arrow, he held his bow awkwardly in front of him. Sheng and Mulan could see his hand shaking from the effort of keeping the bow steady. Then he closed his eyes and let the arrow fly. It zipped across the field and with a loud *THWAP!* struck the target right in the center. Sheng looked over at Mulan, seeing her eyes meet Honghui's. They shared an astonished look, one that made Sheng chuckle.

Their grueling training continued into that night and the days that followed. Mulan had still avoided showers with the other soldiers, volunteering for night watch. Sheng noticed that she was exhausted and he felt pity for the girl. But there was no time to relax. As soon as they learned how to move their limbs in the series of martial art maneuvers, they were given their swords and required to learn the moves all over again. They continued to work on the archery field, the sun beating down on their backs as arrows flew left, right and occasionally straight. But that was not the worst of it.

The worst was the shrine. Day after day, when the sun was highest in the sky and hottest on their shoulders, the conscripts were given two buckets of water. Lifting the heavy, awkward vessel out until their arms were level with their shoulders, they were told to climb. The shrine, a huge structure situated on top of a rocky cliff was only accessible by hundreds of narrow stone steps.

Closing his eyes and inhaling through his nose, Sheng began the climb. The first few steps were manageable. But as he continued upward, his arms started to shake and tremble. Besides him and in front of him, the strongest of men began to stumble, failing the challenge. Water sloshed over the edges of his bucket and he felt his arms growing weaker until he dropped his arms, his buckets crashing to the ground, water spilling on the steps. He looked back, seeing Mulan was only a few steps behind him, she was seated on the ground, her buckets to the side of her. Up ahead of Sheng and

Mulan, Honghui, who had made it farther than anyone, gave up too. Sheng laid on the grass, trying to catch his breath, furious at himself and his weakness. He shared a look with Mulan, confirming that she indeed thought the same.

Hearing a shout from Sergeant Qiang, Sheng saw that the others had dumped their buckets and were making their way back down the few steps that they had climbed. As they arrived at the base of the steps, the soldiers rushed towards a large trough of water. They pushed each other out of the way, thirsty and impatient. Sheng and Mulan approached slowly. Waiting until the others had finished, they stepped forward. Mulan took the ladle and began to drink water. Sheng snorted, sending her a playful glare before cupping his hands and scooping water into his mouth.

As the water hit his lips, Sheng and Mulan bit back a groan. Their eyes closed, they didn't notice Commander Tung watching them.

In the middle of chaos, they were composed. His eyes narrowed, Hua Jun and Hua Sheng were a surprise. The Commander nodded to himself. Hua Jun and Hua Sheng were people to keep an eye on. He continued to stare at them, his eyes boring into the side of their heads, pleasantly intrigued.

Chapter 10

"**Now** she is a girl worth fighting for." Cricket's voice carried over the dining area. Sheng and Mulan scanned the soldiers and the seats, looking for a place to sit and eat. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Longwei leaving the barrack, head down with his meager possessions clutched tightly to his chest. Sheng gulped. He had heard Longwei's name called after the shrine, ordering him to meet with Commander Tung. Sergeant Qiang had spotted the man emptying water from his buckets to make the climb easier and immediately expelled him. It had been the smallest of infractions, but the punishment was quick and severe. Sheng shuddered at the thought of Mulan's secret being revealed, the punishment that would be brought down upon them if her secret came to light.

Shaking his head, he returned his attention to finding a seat. Seeing the only option was near Cricket and another conscript named Ling, Sheng walked over and took a seat with Mulan, trying not to draw attention to himself. As Sheng started to eat, Ling held up a piece of paper. On it was the drawing of a young woman.

"We were matched twenty-seven days ago," he said dreamily. "Her name is Li-Li. Her skin as white as milk. Her fingers like the tender white roots of a green onion . . ."

Sheng bit his lip, holding back a laugh. A green onion? He wondered what the man could've thought of to come up with such a comparison.

"Ling is a romantic!" Cricket said, apparently more impressed then Sheng and Mulan at Ling's choice of words.

Ling smiled dreamily and continued. "Li Li inspires me," he went on. "Her eyes are like morning dewdrops, her hair like distant mountains, darkened by black clouds-"

Yao slammed his hand onto the table, interrupting Ling's similes. "I

like my women buxom!" he said, letting out a loud, booming laugh. Around them, other soldiers voiced their agreement. "With strong, wide hips!" he added.

Sheng's expression formed into one of disgust. He had met some other young men who thought this way about women, it quite frankly disgusted him. Sheng had always wanted to marry for love and had a strong belief that you should marry for love, not just for status or adult activities. Sheng warily glanced at Mulan, seeing her expression of disdain, he sighed. She was being introduced to the world of men and what some of them truly were like.

Cricket had begun to take part. "I like kissing women with cherry red lips," he said, smiling at the men around him in hopes of getting the same reaction that Yao had received. Sheng smiled a bit, deciding to tease the young man.

"Then your mother must have cherry red lips," Sheng teased, "because she's the only women that ever kissed you!" The other soldiers howled with laughter, clapping Sheng hardly on the back.

"I don't care what she looks like-" Po begun.

"I agree" Mulan chimed in, oblivious to the true meaning of his words.

"I just care what she cooks like!"

Sheng and Mulan's face fell. Turning his attention back to his unappetizing meal, he was surprised when he heard Mulan's cover name being called.

"Tell us, Hua Jun," Honghui said, calling out her name. Deciding to press further, he went on. "Tell us. What's you ideal women?"

The room filled again once more with noise as the other soldiers voiced their agreement. Sheng's eyes widened, seeing Mulan's mortified glance, he shrugged, his eyes mirroring her own terror. She tore her gaze away from his, pausing and clearing her throat before answering.

"I guess," she said, making her voice deep and steady. "My ideal

women is courageous."

The room grew silent. The men looked at each other, confused. They were all dumbfounded and disappointed. Only Sheng and Honghui seemed intrigued by her answer.

Stubbornly, Mulan went on, knowing that even as she did, she was once again making herself stand out. But she didn't seem to care. Sheng watched her intently, his eyes shining with curiosity and a bit of pride. Mulan had never liked anyone romantically and never described her ideal men and Sheng's curiosity grew as she was finally voicing her answer, expect describing her ideal man as a women.

"And she has a sense of humor." Some of the men laughed. Mulan ignored them. "She's also smart." Now everyone was laughing. Everyone except Sheng and Honghui.

"But what does she look like?" Cricket pressed.

"That's not the point." Mulan answered, shaking her head.

"Courageous, funny, smart," Yao repeated. "Hua Jun's not describing a women!, he's describing a man! He's describing me!"

As the room erupted into laughter, Sheng watched as Mulan sank back down in her seat, lowering her head. She slowly lifted her head, Sheng watched as Honghui smiled at her and winked. Turning to Yao, he called out. "Courageous, funny, smart? No, that's not you, Yao. That's definitively not you."

Yao's face fell, the attention drifting towards him; away from Mulan. Sheng, Mulan, and Honghui burst out laughing, both of them sending Honghui a grateful smile, before slipping away from the table.

Chapter 11

Sheng laid peacefully on his sleeping platform, staring at the tent's ceiling, his arms tucked behind his head. Mulan sat besides him on her sleeping platform, pulling on her boots. Sheng watched Mulan silently as she laced up her boots, both of them contained in a comfortable silence with another. They soon heard the noise of the tent flap swishing open. Looking up, Sheng and Mulan saw Honghui enter. Spotting them, he smiled broadly, Sheng returning his smile.

Honghui walked over and threw himself on the sleeping platform besides Mulan, a protective wave washing over Sheng as he watched Mulan smile at Honghui. There was something about him that Mulan seemed drawn too, he had a charming nature. Sheng internally chuckled, his protective older brother side was beginning to make it's first appearance.

"Don't let them bother you," he said, copying Sheng's position. "Especially that donkey Yao." Sheng watched as Mulan smiled, his smile growing in response. Somehow, Sheng, Mulan and Honghui had grown from enemies to being . . . allies. Well, almost. Sheng's thoughts drifted back to the dining hall and Yao's comments on women. He still couldn't grasp the fact that men could only see women as objects, only useful for their physical features and traits. A thought occurred in his head. Honghui had never given his idea about an "ideal" women. Sheng and Mulan had wondered why he had been so quiet.

"Are you matched?" Honghui asked hesitantly, breaking Sheng and Mulan's out of their thoughts. "Can I ask?"

The question startled Sheng and Mulan. "No," Mulan answered reflexively. She then quickly corrected herself. "I mean, yes. I was. Almost. It didn't work out."

"That's an understatement" Sheng mumbled, sending Mulan a quick smile as he saw her uneasy glance.

"Lucky you," Honghui said, his voice quiet. They sat there for a moment, his answer lingering in the air. Sheng and Mulan weren't sure what to say. What did Honghui mean?

"I'm matched," Honghui replied, answering their unasked question. "And I'm hoping she's courageous. And funny, and smart." He paused, his eyes growing distant. Sheng wondered what Honghui was picturing in his head as he stared up at the ceiling. Then he added, "Because she looks like a man."

Sheng's eyes widened, a sudden realization washing over him. Honghui liked Mulan, except, as Hua Jun, but, if Mulan was to reveal herself then Honghui and Mulan could possibly have their feelings grow for one another, if Mulan had feelings for Honghui. He looked at Honghui and Mulan, seeing a certain spark between them. He kept silent, not sharing his thoughts.

"I mean," he continued, "how do you even begin to talk to know how to talk to a women, let alone be married to one?"

"Just talk to her like you're talking to me now." Mulan answered hesitantly. Sheng stared solemnly at Mulan, he knew that there was a meaning behind those words, a deeper meaning then Honghui could understand.

"I wish it was that easy," Honghui said, his eyes trained on the tent ceiling. "What . . . what if she doesn't like me?"

"She will," Mulan said, her words softer then she intended them to be. Sheng studied the pair, watching them. He knew that there was something between Honghui and Mulan that he couldn't quite pinpoint.

Slowly, Honghui looked over at Mulan. Their eyes met and for a hushed moment, neither said anything, the air growing heavy with unspoken emotion. Shaking it off, Mulan cleared her throat.

"I mean, I think she will," she said, keeping emotion out of her voice. "You never know with women . . ." she added with a shrug and a conspiratorial look.

Honghui didn't say anything, though he did sit up. Swinging his legs over the side of the sleeping platform, he inched closer. Mulan instinctively backed up. What was he doing? Sheng wondered. Why was he getting closer? He came closer still. He breathed in, and for a moment, Sheng was convinced that he was going to kiss Mulan.

And then he recoiled, Sheng letting out a sigh of relief and silently thanking whatever being was out there.

"You should really consider skipping and take a shower," he said. "You stink, man." Then standing up, he patted her shoulder and left. Sheng snickered, getting up from his sleeping platform and leaning closer to Mulan, he breathed in and then moved away from Mulan, his nose scrunching in disgust and his eyes crinkling.

Mulan groaned. Lifting her arm, she took a quick whiff. Then she let out a louder groan.

"Honghui was right. You do smell. You smell exactly like a man" Sheng said, voicing her thoughts. His expression went from disgusted to puzzled, placing a hand beneath his chin, his eyebrows furrowing in confusion.

He turned his gaze to hers. "How could you shower? Where would you shower?" Sheng said, throwing his hands up in frustration. Mulan shrugged, sending him a look of confusion.

Sheng looked at her before getting up and placing a chaste kiss on her forehead. "See you soon, little sister." Sheng whispered before walking off.

Chapter 12

A friendship had finally blossomed between Mulan, Sheng and Honghui. It was easier spending time in the dining area the barracks knowing that they had an ally.

On the training ground, their relationship took a different state. It was now becoming clear to the sergeants and the soldiers, that of all the conscripts, Honghui, Mulan and Sheng showed the most potential. No one was surprised by Honghui. He was built to be a warrior. Strong, intense and with brains to match. But Sheng and Mulan *were* a surprise. They were never the first or the fastest out of the group, but they always accomplished their tasks, and they did so with quiet dignity that made others stop in their tracks and take notice. As the days passed, they grew stronger too.

Standing in the middle of the parade grounds one morning, Sheng held a spear out in front of him. The conscripts had graduated from their earlier training, when their weapons had been sticks, and were now being paired up to practice one-on-one combat with the real thing. Sheng turned his gaze towards Mulan, who was gravitating towards Honghui; Honghui doing the same. As Sergeant Qiang nodded, Sheng lifted up his spear, facing his partner.

And they began to fight.

Block. Attack. Block. Attack. Each move Sheng's partner made, he anticipated, taking a defensive stance and then attacking when an opening was visible, lifting his own spear in a steady smooth rhythm that his partner met. The tempo built as they moved faster and faster. Both of them smiling, joy evident on their faces. Sheng broke up the tempo, knocking his opponent's spear out of his hand and allowing a smile to blossom on his face at his victory. He knelt down to the ground, picking up his opponent's spear and placing it in his hand. His partner's gaze was elsewhere, focused on something behind him. Sheng spun around, seeing Mulan and Honghui fighting each other fiercely, causing the other conscripts to stop what they were doing and just stare.

Mulan and Honghui continued to go at each other. Harder, faster, fiercer, they fought, both determined to make the other one falter. Soldiers cheered on the pair, Sheng joining them. Hearing the commotion, Commander Tung emerged from his tent, Sergeant Qiang following closely behind him. They stopped in their tracks, exchanging looks before focusing on Mulan and Honghui.

Sweat dripped down Mulan's brow, and Sheng could see her shoulders shaking, but her concentration and determination did not falter.

Mulan swung, catching Honghui off guard. He stumbled back and for a moment, it seemed as Mulan had the advantage. But in one smooth move, he swung back around and knocked Mulan's spear to the ground.

Mulan charged at him, ducking under his spear. Lifting her arms, she kicked her foot high in the air, causing a conscript's spear to fly out of his hand, staring up at the spear, Mulan jumped up in the air.

For a moment, it seemed, she appeared to be hang in the air as if held aloft by wings. And then, in a move so fast, she spun in the air, her foot coming out and meeting the still flying spear. Whipping her foot fast and furiously, she kicked the blunt end of the spear, sending it hurtling through the air with speed and power, going straight at Honghui. Honghui, thankfully, dodged the spear, his face mirroring Sheng's look of amazement and wonder. The spear lodged itself into the ground, embedded so deep that the spear did not fall to the ground.

The men's cheers stopped. They stood open-mouthed, including Sheng, as they looked from Mulan to Honghui and back again.

Sheng watched Mulan with an immense look of pride. His little sister had just beaten Honghui. Honghui! He silently cheered her on, noting to himself that he would congratulate her later, and maybe even have her teach him the move. A seed of worry also had managed to plant itself in his mind, Mulan had brought even more attention to herself and this was attention that she could not slip out of this time.

Sheng watched as Mulan ducked her head and hurried away, pushing past the crowd of men and making her way towards the barracks, Sheng trailing behind her.

Behind them, the rest of the men watched, shocked in silence. What, they all wondered, had they just witnessed?

Chapter 13

Every time Sheng closed his eyes, he saw Mulan spinning through the air, the ground crunching under her feet as she slammed down. He saw the varied looks of the other soldiers - some surprised, some awed, some bothered. But more than anything, he saw Honghui staring at her, and it was that look that lingered in his memory. Either way, he couldn't get the image of the men's faces out of his mind. He didn't know what to feel. He didn't know whether to be proud or worried about his baby sister.

A part of him was proud, he saw Honghui's disbelief and he was proud that she was proving him wrong and showing that she was strong and could in fact hold her own and be just as good as any men, but, a part of Sheng was worried. Mulan had brought attention to herself, attention that couldn't be avoided this time.

Commander Tung definitely noticed what she did and he might continue to push her to improve her chi but as Hua Jun, a part of her was locked away and Mulan would need to reveal that part of her to unlock her full potential, but doing so would risk everything. It would take an incredible amount of courage and strength to reveal herself as Hua Mulan. Who knows how the men would react; what they would do. The question ran through his mind every day.

Now Sheng laid on his sleeping platform, willing to let his eyes close. But every time he shifted, he was assaulted with a hideous odor, which filled the tent. Sheng opened his eyes as he heard a sleeping platform creak, seeing Mulan swing her legs over her sleeping platform. She grabbed fresh clothes and tiptoed past the other soldiers out of the barracks.

The encampment was quiet and empty, all of the soldiers, except Sheng and Mulan, retired for the night, so Sheng and Mulan were able to move quickly, the only noise being their hushed whispers. Their footsteps barely made a sound as they floated over the ground towards the lake at the edge of the camp. A bright moon in the sky above illuminated its still surface. Sheng saw Mulan smile at the

sight of the fresh water.

Taking a peak over his shoulder make sure no one was looking, Sheng nodded towards Mulan, turning around so that his back was facing her. He heard the quiet *thump* as her clothes fell to the floor, piling on top of each other.

He heard the small splash in the water, signalling that Mulan had entered the lake. A sigh of pure bliss escaped the girl's lips, causing Sheng's shoulders to shake slightly with amusement. He let out his own sigh of content, staring up at the moon that illuminated the space around them.

There, in the silence between them, she was just Mulan, Sheng's little sister. Not Hua Jun, his younger brother who joined him in the army, trying to prove "himself." He hadn't realized how hard the act had been on him and Mulan mentally and physically. It was exhausting keeping a secret for so long.

Sheng's head snapped up, hearing footsteps, his eyes widened in horror as he realized Honghui was walking towards them.

"Hua Jun!" Honghui called out, startling Mulan.

"We need to talk!" he shouted as he began undressing in front of Sheng. Sheng's eyes widened, he turned his head to side, neither staring at Mulan or Honghui.

Panic filled Sheng. This couldn't be the end. They had come too far and were not about to be killed by Honghui revealing their secret. Sheng averted his eyes from Honghui, Honghui shedding his clothes with no shame. He stared up at Sheng, his eyes flickering between Sheng and Mulan in confusion.

"Care to join us Sheng?" Honghui questioned obliviously.

"N-No" Sheng stammered, lowering his eyes.

"I came here to be alone-" Mulan called out, splashing water as she tried to move away, looking around for anything to cover herself.

Honghui ignored her protest, Sheng watching with horror. Jumping

into the water, he swam towards her. "What *was* that today?" he said as his arms sliced through the water. "You were incredible."

"I don't want to talk about it," Mulan said, turning so her back was facing him.

Stopping a few feet away, Honghui treaded water. He looked at Mulan with curiosity, causing Sheng to flood with panic, the only noise being his heart thumping erratically in his ears. When Mulan didn't make a move toward him, Honghui swam around to face her. But Mulan mirrored his movements, keeping her back facing him. He pressed on anyway. "Teach me how you did it. Show me."

Mulan shook her head, responding. "Leave me alone," she repeated, the words coming out harsher then she probably intended them to be. But Honghui was not bothered.

"Why?" he asked. "What's wrong with you? I thought we were friends."

Sheng watched sadly, knowing that Honghui would not get the answer he was looking for, quite the opposite actually.

"I'm not your friend" Mulan stated harshly, causing Sheng to cringe at her words, knowing that she didn't mean them. They were friends. Or at least they all were becoming friends.

As Mulan remained silent the air grew tense between the group, Honghui sighed, his tone turning cold.

"You can turn your back on me," he stated, his eyes flickering between Sheng and Mulan once again. "But when the time comes, do not turn your back on them." He said harshly. "You owe them that much."

Honghui cut through the water, swimming back to shore and giving one last harsh glare at Sheng before picking up his clothes and making his way back to the tent, not looking back.

Sheng turned around, hearing Mulan exit and lake and grab her clothes. He stared up at the moon, lost in thought. A soft hand was placed on his shoulder, causing him to turn around.

"I'm sorry" Mulan apologized, lowering her gaze down to the ground.

Sheng shook his head. "There's nothing to apologize for."

"But there is" she protested, throwing her hands up in the air. Sheng watched her silently as she continued.

"I could have gone by myself. I could've kept you out of this mess." Mulan whispered loudly. "I could have-"

"Stop" Sheng said softly, grabbing her shoulders, making her face him. "You know that I would have never let you go alone" he said. "We need each other. I'm glad I'm here with you. If we do something, we do it together." He told her. "If your secret get revealed, so be it." He exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air; mimicking her movement. "I'll go with you anywhere Mulan. I'll never leave you. I promise you that, little sister."

He grinned, nudging her lightly. "Besides, we all know that I'll be the one to make sure that we go down in a blaze of glory." Sheng joked, causing both of them to let out a watery chuckle.

Mulan, in response to his words, pulled him in for a tight embrace, gripping onto him tightly, as if she was to never let go. She laid her head on his shoulder, hugging him tightly. He pulled her closer, hugging her tightly to his chest. The siblings sat there, holding each other in a peaceful silence, fully content in each other's presence and gripping onto each other for dear life.

If only this moment could last forever . . .

Chapter 14

It felt as though Sheng had just closed his eyes when he heard Sergeant Qiang's shout. Biting back a groan and a witty remark, he pulled himself up off of his sleeping cot. Around him, the other soldiers were throwing on their clothes and armor, lacing up boots and grabbing their varying equipment. Spotting Honghui, Sheng ducked his head, trying to avoid the man at all costs.

But the space was small, and it was impossible for Mulan and Sheng to hide from the man. Sheng followed after Mulan as she headed to grab her boots, groaning softly as he saw Honghui coming towards their direction. Sheng leaned down with Mulan, hearing her gasp when Honghui accidentally brushed his shoulder along hers. Honghui stared coldly at Mulan, Sheng biting back a groan.

"Good morning" he greeted coldly to Sheng.

Sheng hesitated before replying. "Good morning."

Honghui nodded, walking back to his sleeping platform. A sigh of relief escaped Sheng, one that he didn't even know he had been holding in. At least the man didn't completely hate Sheng like he did with Mulan.

"Hua Jun!" Sergeant Qiang shouted, causing Sheng to snap his head towards the man, dread bubbling in his stomach. "Report to Commander Tung."

Sheng felt as if his world was about to turn upside down. What had Mulan done? Innocent Mulan wasn't capable of doing anything terrible? His mind concocted the worst possible situations, causing Sheng to bite his lip in fear, fiddling with his hands as his anxiety and fear grew.

He caught Honghui's pitying gaze for a moment before turning away, not wanting to see the man's sympathy.

Mulan kept her head down, ducking her head, she opened the tent's flap and walked towards Commander Tung's tent.

They had made it this far. Sheng was puzzled, not knowing why Commander Tung would possibly want to see his sister. Maybe it was because of Mulan and Honghui's fight? That could be the only reason. She wouldn't get in much trouble for fighting, but, even then, Commander Tung seemed pleased with Mulan, making no move to stop the fight, letting it continue.

The pit in his stomach grew, he leaned back on his sleeping platform, staring up at the the tent, anxiously waiting for Mulan's arrival. He didn't know what he could do if he was to ever lose her. They needed each other. They were brother and sister, they needed each other to push forward.

Sheng's head snapped up as he heard footsteps approaching. He looked up, spotting Honghui approaching him. The man held compassion and sympathy in his eyes, he hesitantly sat down besides Sheng, Sheng's gaze focused on the man.

"I know we aren't really on the best of terms right now." The man began, looking at Sheng. Sheng looked at Honghui curiously, motioning for Honghui to continue. "But, for what it's worth, I'm sure Hua Jun will come back" he added hesitantly. Sheng sighed, tearing his gaze away from Honghui and looking up at the tent ceiling. "Besides," Honghui said, his tone having a lighter and playful mood. "We both know that Hua Jun is too innocent."

Sheng laughed, Honghui laughing with him. "That is true" Sheng replied, a fond smile on his lips.

Honghui got up, staring at Sheng. "Hua Jun is a good man" he said, making his way towards the flap of the tent. Honghui pulled back the flap of the tent, cold air rushing inside the warm tent, leaving Sheng with his thoughts.

Sheng looked to the flap of the tent. "Thank you" he murmured softly, his gaze lingering on the flap of the tent before laying his head back, a sigh escaping his lips as he stared up at the tent ceiling.

Chapter 15

Sheng waited patiently for Mulan, immediately rushing to her side as she entered the tent, a confused expression upon her face.

"Are you alright? What happened?" he asked in concern.

She laughed lightly, seeing his worried expression. "Don't worry, Sheng. I haven't been kicked out yet."

Sheng let out a sigh of relief, dramatically gasping and placing a hand over his heart. "You had me worried sick! I thought I was going to have to get myself kicked out."

She scoffed and playfully shoved him. "We all know that you would be the first one to get kicked out. I would be the last person that would be kicked out if . . ."

Sheng interrupted her, changing the subject, knowing where the conversation was leading too. "How was the talk with Commander Tung"

"Good" she responded.

For the rest of the night, they talked and chatted about Mulan's conversation with Commander Tung, both of them interested in his words.

'Time Skip'

"The chi pervades the universe and all living things."

The morning after Mulan's conversation with Commander Tung, they were called out to the parade grounds. Arranging them in a circle around him, he moved in a series of slow, intricate motions.

As he moved, he spoke. The conscripts watched, mesmerized by the way the commander's body seemed to be one with his weapon. His

sword became an extension of his arm; his legs, like roots of a tree, were firmly planted on the ground until they lifted and appeared to become light as feathers. He signaled to them, and Sheng, Mulan and the others began to mirror his moves.

"We are all born with it," Commander Tung continued. "But only the most dedicated will connect deeply to his chi and become a great warrior."

Sheng focused, his body moving on it's own accord, the commander's voice rolling over him like the water of the lake, each bringing a calmness upon him.

"Tranquil as a forest," he said. "But on fire within."

Swinging his arm through the air, Sheng practiced the movements over and over again. He trained with Mulan throughout the afternoon and then later besides the Magnolia Tree, patiently waiting for Mulan. Mulan joined him silently, both of them practicing under the light of the moon. With every swish of their sword, their chi grew stronger. It blossomed, like the leaves on the magnolia tree by the lake's shore. The sensation was empowering and strange, like something wholly new but also strangely familiar.

Chapter 16

Over the next few days, the conscripts training intensified. It was a subtle shift at first. A few more minutes tacked onto the end of each session. A bit more bark-and-bite from Sergeant Qiang as he shouted orders. Tensions rose as it became clear that they were no longer practicing to become soldiers, they were becoming ones. They were no longer practicing for an actual battle but for an actual one.

"The Rouran enemy is vast," Sergeant Qiang warned as Sheng, Mulan and the others went through a series of martial arts movements. "They're ruthless and unpredictable. Yet physical force may not be met equal force. The warrior yields to force-- and redirects it." He stopped in front of Mulan. Mulan kept her gaze ahead, not allowing the man to intimidate her.

Ever since Sheng and Mulan's conversation, Sheng had been able to think of nothing but his chi. It consumed him. Fueled him. Drove him. Every moment he could spare, he spent trying to focus it. Mulan's words had been like a spark. He'd realized, in the moments after they talked, he owed it to Mulan and his father to be the best warrior he could be. If he didn't try for that, then everything Mulan and him had done would be in vain. So, night after night, day after day. He practiced. And night after night, day after day, he grew stronger.

Under the moonlight besides the lake with Mulan, he moved his body through the maneuvers that felt natural. In his head, he heard Sergeant Qiang's words. *Disadvantage can be turned into an advantage,* he would tell the soldiers as they pressed their swords forward, swished their spears through the air, lifted their shields in defense.

Sheng and Mulan's constant practice and intense focus did not go unnoticed. He felt Sergeant Qiang and Commander Tung's eyes on

them more than others. But it no longer made him shrink in inward. He felt fueled with courage and a strength he hadn't known he had.

But there was still one challenge that stymied him.

"Four ounces can move a thousand pounds," the Sergeant said as Sheng, Mulan and the others approached the steep steps that led to the shrine. They all paused, their eyes lifting in unison to the challenge in front of them. On either side of Sheng was a bucket filled to the brim with water. Above him, the other soldiers grabbed their own buckets and started up the steps. Mulan and Sheng waited, sparing a glance at one another. "Four ounces can move a thousand pounds" they whispered.

Closing his eyes, he focused. He felt the familiar surge of energy wash through him as he connected to his powerful chi. The grunts and groans from the other man vanished. He felt only the gentle breeze on his cheeks. His eyes started to close, he envisioned the peak of the shrine. He remembered the peace he had felt with Mulan under the magnolia tree. Channeling that, he opened his eyes.

Bending down, he grasped the handles of the buckets and lifted them. They felt lighter then they had the first few times he had faced this challenge, thanks to his strength training. But he knew the challenge was not in the first few steps, but in the endurance one must have to make it all the way to the top. Step by step, he climbed.

Ahead of him, the conscripts steps slowed, except Mulan. Her buckets were raised above her shoulders and she showed no signs of slowing down. She had a distant look on her face, mirroring Sheng's. He knew that she was connecting to her chi like he was. He knew their chi was strong.

One by one, the conscripts began to fall. First Cricket, his face wet with tears, sank to the steps. Then Po, who threw his buckets aside and simply laid down, defeated. Yao was the next to fail. Filled with rage, he threw his buckets, the wood shattering against the rocky cliffs.

Still, Sheng and Mulan continued. Their steps were steady, their shoulders still. On either side of them the water in the buckets did not flow over the sides, but instead remained calm. They grew stronger with each step. The focus of their face never faltered, even as they moved past their fallen comrades.

Soon the only other conscript left was Honghui. A few steps ahead of them, his forehead was beaded with sweat and his buckets were sinking closer and closer to the ground. His steps were heavy and his breathing ragged. Like Sheng and Mulan, his face was focused, but doubt was beginning to seep through his expression.

Sheng and Mulan didn't notice his expression. They kept moving. Step by step, higher and higher, gathering strength until they caught up to Honghui--and then passed him. Sheng felt his gaze on their backs as they continued. He ignored it. He was somewhere else. His body was on the stairs, his arms holding the buckets above his shoulders, but his mind was in a deeper place. He was fueled by the thoughts of Mulan and his father, his mother, his sister Xiu.

Behind them, Honghui's body gave out. He sunk to the steps. Now it was only Sheng and Mulan left. A wave of pride washed over Sheng and he resisted the urge to smile. As Honghui, Commander Tung, Sergeant Qiang, and all the others watched in astonishment, Sheng and Mulan kept climbing. Step by step, higher and higher, until . . .

They reached the top.

For a long moment, Sheng stood, his chest rising and falling evenly, gripping Mulan's hand tightly. He turned around, his eyes growing wide as he took in the breathtaking view from the top of the shrine. Sheng smiled, letting out a cry of triumph, pulling Mulan closely to his chest.

Pride flooded through him. They had done it. They had done what no man had been able to do. She, He, Mulan, Sheng, a boy and girl from a small village, had made the impossible possible. He turned back to look at the other soldiers below. Only then, as he saw the looks of wonder, awe and amazement on their faces, did he allow himself to share a smile with Mulan. He hugged her closely to his chest, letting out a sigh of relief. She wore a happy smile on her

face, pride gleaming in her eyes. He stared down at her with pride and adoration.

"We did it, Mulan" he murmured. "We did the impossible, little sister."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. They stared out into the sky, content with each other's presence.

They had done it . . .

AN: This chapter was over 1000 words! I'm so happy that we got a heartfelt moment between Sheng and Mulan. Now, the story can really progress and we can really get into the plot since their first battle is coming up!

Chapter 17

Sergeant Qiang ordered the soldiers to the parade ground. Despite their exhaustion, the men jumped to attention and made their way over as fast as their tired legs could carry them. Sheng and Mulan arrived last, having had to climb down from the shrine.

When all the conscripts were gathered, Commander Tung took his place in the front of them. "Our training is not finished," he said. "But we live during a time of war. Therefore, we shift with changing winds." He paused to make sure he had everyone's attention. Satisfied the men were listening, he went on. "We leave to defend the Mountain Steppe Garrison."

The response was swift. Surprise, fear, and excitement spread through the men. Whispers and murmurs rose over them like a wave. This is what they had been waiting for--and dreading.

From his spot at the back of the crowd, Sheng's cheeks grew pale. The energy and strength he had just been feeling faded. It was one thing to accomplish, a training task. It was an entirely different thing to face actual battle.

Commander Tung lifted a hand. The men grew silent once more. "You will now take the Oath of the Warrior, pledging fidelity to the Three Pillars of Virtue."

The commander pulled out his sword, Sheng's eyes widened as he realized it was identical to his father's. Sensing his eyes on him, Commander Tung looked over and nodded every so subtly in Sheng and Mulan's direction. "Without each one of these pillars, your vital chi is diminished."

One by one, the student warriors unsheathed their swords and held their swords high in the air. As Sheng lifted his own, his gaze lingered on the inscriptions on Mulan's sword. His eyes read the words as, in front of them, Tung said them aloud. "Brave!" he

shouted.

The soldiers, including Mulan and Sheng echoed their word back to him.

"Loyal!" Again, after the commander's shout, the soldiers shouted back.

A sense of dread began to build in Sheng's stomach as he saw the the word that would be shouted next.

"True!" Commander Tung finished.

Around them, all the other soldiers yelled out the word, their voice full of emotion and pride. But Sheng stayed quiet, his sword lingering in the air. How could he swear to be true when he keeping a lie?

Chapter 18

Sheng's thoughts were still twirling the next morning as they marched out of camp and towards the Mountain Steppe Garrison. The footsteps of the newly made soldiers provided background noise to his heart pounding in his ears.

His deceit was weighing him down more than the bag he carried on his back. He could not reveal Mulan, that was her decision and he would stand by her decision no matter what, even if it was to cost him his life. He would always remain at her side.

These men had become his friends. Sergeant Qiang and Commander Tung had become his mentors. He felt as if he was betraying them all, and to give his full attention on the battlefield, he needed a clear mind. Yet silence was his friend, too. Not speaking would allow him to keep a secret, while the other choice would result in a punishment worse than death . . . disgrace.

Sheng gave Mulan an uneasy glance, seeing that she was lost in thought, he kept quiet. He wondered if she was thinking the same thing as him.

She leaned over to his ear hesitantly, pausing to speak her thoughts. "I'm going to reveal myself to Commander Tung."

"What" Sheng whispered loudly. He opened his mouth but no words came out, he let out a defeated sigh before following Mulan, who was making her way to Commander Tung's tent.

Taking a deep breath, he waited by her side.

"Commander Tung," Mulan said, announcing their presence. "It's Hua Jun and Hua Sheng."

"You may enter, Hua Sheng, Hua Jun." Commander Tung's response was quick and curt.

Entering the tent, Sheng nodded at his commanding officer. His attention was focused on his sword, which lay across his lap. He was sharpening it with smooth, methodical strokes.

"Commander Tung" Mulan began. "There is something that weighs heavily on our hearts. We need to confess it to you." Sheng's mouth grew dry as the Commander looked up at them.

He opened and closed his mouth several times, trying desperately to make his tongue form the right words. "It has to do with the Three Pillars of Virtue . . ." That was as far as he could get.

As he struggled, Commander Tung watched. To their surprise, he held compassion in his eyes, as if seeing their struggle hurt him. Getting to his feet, the commander approached them. "There's no shame in being fearful before battle," he said, mistaking the reason for their visit. "In fact, it's a testament to your honesty that you confess such doubt."

His words stabbed at Sheng's already guilty conscience. Honesty? They were there to tell him how *dishonest* they were. He shook his head, trying to get their conversation back on track and say what they needed to say. "Yes Commander," he said, "but the other virtues-"

Commander Tung interrupted him, his gaze set on Mulan. "Hua Jun," he said, his tone serious. "I've been doing this a long time. I stake my career on my ability to judge character. You're a good man. Perhaps, one day you'll accompany me to my village, where I will introduce you to my daughter."

His *daughter?* Sheng's jaw dropped. Those were the last words he anticipated coming out of Commander Tung's mouth.

"And our village matchmaker of course," Commander Tung finished.

Not knowing how to respond, Sheng bowed with Mulan. Sheng had no choice but to lower his head and await Mulan's answer.

"It would be my great honor, Commander." Mulan responded, Sheng cringing at her words. This just got a whole lot worse.

Commander Tung smiled, relief on his face. Sheng realized that he had been oddly nervous to say such a thing to Mulan. It made the lie he was keeping feel more shameful. They had come to tell him the truth and yet somehow ended up further into the mess that Mulan had created.

"I'll look forward to the look on your father's face when you give him the news." Commander Tung said, bringing the conversation to a close.

Slipping outside the tent, Sheng let out a nervous breath. He glanced at Mulan, raising an eyebrow at her.

"What was I supposed to do?" Mulan whispered.

"I don't know. Maybe not agree to get married to a women" he whispered. "When you are one" he added.

"Thank you for the support," Mulan said, this time not bothering to whisper or keep the sarcasm out of her voice. "Really."

Sheng sighed, wrapping his arm around Mulan's shoulder. "We'll figure something out. We always do."

Mulan dragged a hand over her face, groaning in frustration. "I don't think we can get out of this."

Sheng shook his head, thoughts rushing through his head. "I don't know what to do anymore."

"We let the lie live, and now things couldn't possibly get any worse."

Chapter 19

Fortunately, Sheng wasn't given much time to dwell on the growing chaos of their situation. Arriving back the tent, they only had a few hours of restless sleep before the soldiers were once again awoken and ordered to move out.

They marched through the desert steppe, the dry, shrub-covered ground offering them little protection from the beating sun, or any potential enemy eyes. Sheng's gaze drifted over the arid landscape as they walked, his mind feeling as drained as the land around him. After a few hours' march, the land begun to rise beneath their feet, the shrubs giving way to a rocky landscape. In the distance, the Mountain Steppe Garrison rose up, protected on one side by mountains but left vulnerable up front.

Arriving in the front of the garrison entrance, Commander Tung lifted a hand. Sheng, Mulan and others came to halt as they waited for the soldiers to open the heavy gates. As the wooden doors opened, the inside of the garrison came to view. It was like any other garrison under the Emperor's rule. Filled with vendors, selling their goods and a few smaller buildings, it was busy, but not bustling.

"The Mountain Steppe Garrison welcomes the Fifth Battalion of His Majesty's Imperial Army."

Commander Tung raised his sword in response, his expression hardened and serious.

'Time Skip'

"Scout at the gate!" A soldier shouted.

Sheng's head snapped in the direction of the pounding hoof beats, seeing two soldiers sitting a top a horse. Panic and distress was worn on their expressions, their chests rising and falling frantically.

"Bori Khan assembles not a half day's ride from here. They prepare for battle. We're greatly outnumbered."

"Fortify for siege!" The Garrison Commander ordered. Mulan's head snapped in the direction, her eyes panicked. Sheng placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, giving her a weak smile.

Commander Tung scratched his chin, deep in thought. "No. He who moves first controls the enemy." Commander Tung replied, seeing the soldiers apprehensive expression's. "We leave at first light."

Sheng let out a shaky breath. They were going to war . . .

'Another Time Skip'

"Anything you want me to tell your mothers when you die?" Yao joked, a smirk on his face.

Cricket stared at the fire before responding. "That's not funny."

Sheng hummed in agreement, nodding his head. His gaze fixed on the flames.

"What's the matter? Scared?" Yao taunted.

"No." Cricket replied, shying away from Yao.

"Who knows who will live past tomorrow?" Ling interrupted. Sheng glanced at Mulan before returning his gaze to the fire, lost in thought. "We may never see each other again." The atmosphere tensed and people grew quiet as Ling's words began to sink in.

Sheng inhaled a shaky breath, Mulan stared at him for a moment before placing a hand on his shoulder, giving him a reassuring smile.

"Our father once said . . ." Mulan began. "There is no courage without fear."

Sheng smiled slightly at her words, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"So?" Yao replied.

Mulan stared at Yao, unaffected by the man's response. "So this is natural."

"Well, it doesn't feel natural" Chien Po answered, exhaling sharply.

Mulan stared at Honghui. "Listen to me, all of you." Mulan said. "We will live. I guarantee it. Because I will protect you. We'll protect each other. We'll fight for each other."

Mulan stared at her shaking hand, grabbing it with her left hand. Sheng gulped nervously, reassured by his sister's words.

"Except for you, Yao" Mulan joked. "I might take the opportunity to kill you myself."

Laughter chorused through the group, Sheng feeling lighter. Mulan always knew the right things to say. The laughter died down, the men staring at the fire. Sheng sighed, laying his head on Mulan's shoulder. Mulan leaned her head on his, sighing softly. There was a chance that they would never see each other again. That they both could fall in battle.

It was a terrifying thought . . .

Chapter 20

Sheng stared at the thick mist in front of him. The sun tried to cut through the grey, making it hard to see what was shadow and what was real. Astride his horse, Sheng could make out a bit more than the soldiers on the ground could. But not much more.

Sheng had been surprised when Commander Tung had ordered them to stop in the middle of the mist-filled valley. It seemed like that would put them at a disadvantage strategically. But apparently not. This way, the commander told them, the element of surprise would be on their side. They knew which direction the Rouran army was coming from, whereas the enemy had no idea what now lay in wait.

As the sun grew stronger, it burned off the mist. Slowly, the shadows disappeared. Sheng's breath caught in his throat as the last of the wisps disappeared, revealing a massive army across from the Imperial battalion. The Rourans seemed to cover the entire horizon, banners of dozens of tribes whipping through the air.

In front of them all was Bori Khan. He sat astride his midnight-black stallion, his eyes cold and calculating, even from such a distance. Sheng and Mulan visibly tensed, and beneath Sheng, his horse shifted nervously on his feet. As part of the cavalry, Sheng and Mulan would be in one of the last groups to charge. But it didn't matter when in the order Sheng would go. Now that he had seen the enemy, the last tiny sliver of hope that he might avoid the battle had faded.

Turning, Sheng saw his friends standing among the infantry: Po, Yao, Ling and Honghui. The usual confidence was gone from their faces, replaced with apprehension and fear.

His eyes stopped on Mulan. To his surprise, Mulan was staring back at him. For a moment, they held each other's gaze. He saw in Mulan's eyes the same questioning look, the unspoken apology for dragging him into war. Both of them recognized that this might

very well be the last time they ever saw each other alive. The fear of losing Mulan was too much to bear; it was overwhelming.

The sound of drums boomed through the valley, startling Sheng. He dropped his gaze from Mulan's. Pushing away the fear, Sheng turned back to the valley and the enemy beyond. It was time to focus.

The battle was here.

As the drumming grew louder and faster, the front line of the Imperial soldiers kneeled. Behind them, the archers stepped forward, readying their bows. Cricket stood in the middle of them, his eyes clear, his shoulders steady. Sheng couldn't help being impressed. The boy had become a warrior.

Commander Tung raised his hand. The army seemed to take a collective breath. And then, the commander gave the signal. As the Imperial flag waved down, the archers let their arrows fly. They arched high over the valley, now a battlefield, towards the Rouran army below.

If Commander Tung thought this first wave of attack would intimidate Bori Khan, he was quickly proven wrong. The Rouran warrior didn't even wait for the arrows to land before he gave his own signal. In an instant, the sound of the drums was muted by the pounding hooves of hundreds of horses as Bori Khan led his army racing across the valley.

Waiting anxiously for Commander Tung's signal, Sheng watched as Bori Khan shouted to a few of his men and then, with a dozen or so of the warriors, peeled off from the main body of the Rouran army. The momentum carried the rest of the army forward. Acting quickly, Commander Tung shouted orders to cavalry, including Sheng and Mulan, sending them after the Rouran leader. While the rest of the infantry and archers took their chances with the oncoming horde, the cavalry exploded after Bori Khan.

His horse's mane whipped behind him as Sheng rode his horse across the valley. Ahead, he could see Bori Khan, and the warriors he now recognized as the fabled Shadow warriors noticed they were

being followed. With a shout, one of them spun around so that he was riding his horse backward. As the horse galloped on, unbothered, the Shadow Warrior notched two arrows, letting them fly with quick succession.

An Imperial soldier nearby yelped as he was hit and knocked from his horse. Sheng didn't have time to register fear, as a moment later, an arrow zipped past Mulan, barely missing her. He heard a thud as another rider fell. Still, they raced on.

As the ground changed beneath them, growing rockier, Sheng notched his own arrows. He barely took notice of the steamy mountainous environment they had entered. He only had eyes for the Rouran warriors. More enemy soldiers were spinning on their horses, firing arrows faster and faster. The Imperial soldiers began to fall with more and more frequency. Some were felled by other arrows, others when their horses tripped on the rock terrain. Steam caused by the warm air spewing from the volcanic vents rose, clouding Sheng's vision, but still he rode on as one by one the other Imperial soldiers, deciding the Rouran leader was far too gone, turned and retreated on the battlefield.

Mulan and Sheng were the only ones left.

His horses pace slowed. Sheng looked over his shoulder at the other soldiers who were now racing away. The thought of following them in retreat was strong. But stronger still was the sound of Commander Tung's voice in his mind as he called out the Pillars of Virtue. It was his duty as a member of the Imperial Army to be loyal and brave. He might not be able to live up to the virtue of truth, but that didn't mean he couldn't fight for the other pillars. Dragging his gaze from the sight of the fleeing Imperial Army, he spotted Bori Khan disappearing into the steam ahead.

Sharing a glance with Mulan and screwing up his courage, he urged his horse on and followed Mulan as they rode on.

Chapter 21

Sheng slowed his horse to a trot. The stream was too dense to see through and he didn't want to risk the big horse stumbling on one of the thermal vents that dotted the landscape. For what seemed like hours, but no more than a few minutes, Sheng and Mulan wandered, lost, inside the stream clouds.

When the clouds cleared, Sheng and Mulan gasped simultaneously. The barren landscape was a riot of vibrant color. Red lava poured from vents, transforming into lines of black frozen rock as the air cooled. It was though he had ridden into a whole other world.

And Bori Khan was nowhere to be seen.

An ear-piercing shriek filled the air. Looking up, Sheng only had a moment to register the hawk diving towards them before they were knocked from their horses' back's. They toppled to the ground. His helmet knocked loose from the impact, fell from his head and tumbled across the ground.

Sheng cast a glance at Mulan, her helmet was also laying on the ground. Her face was covered in dirt, showing exhaustion. Her topknot had come undone, her hair falling over her shoulders.

Scrambling to their feet, Sheng and Mulan looked up, hearing the shriek of the hawk. Sheng watched in disbelief as the hawk transformed into a beautiful woman. The woman appeared strong, and deadly.

"You're a witch . . ." Mulan said, the words sticking in her throat.

The women nodded. She walked closer, looking Mulan up and down, her eyes lingering on the armor and moving to the hair that now fell over Mulan's shoulders. Something flashed across her eyes, a revelation.

"You've kept your secret. Well done. But now you are in my way.

You must retreat. Go."

Sheng's eyes widened as he realized the women had seen past Mulan's disguise.

"I am Hua Jun," Mulan said. "Soldier in the Emperor's Imperial Army."

The witch's gaze flickered to Sheng. "And who are you, soldier?"

"I am Hua Sheng," Sheng said. "Soldier in the Emperor's Imperial Army."

Lifting their swords, they charged at the witch. But Xianniang fended them off. With a wave of her hand, she sent them flying to the ground. Mulan let out a shout and jumped to her feet, standing in front of Sheng. Terror washed through Sheng as Mulan let out a shout and charged at the witch. Once again, Mulan charged at Xianniang and once again, the witch brushed her away.

"Your deceit weakens you," Xianniang said as she wrapped her long fingers around Mulan's neck. Sheng's heart pounded in his chest as he pointed his sword at the witch, fear flooding through him. "It poisons your chi."

Lifting his sword, Sheng ran at the witch, bringing his sword down. While holding Mulan, the witch blocked his blade with her palm. Desperately, Sheng tugged at his blade, hoping to release Mulan from the witch's grasp. To his surprise, the blade came back, slicing the witch's palm. As blood bloomed on her palm, Xianniang's eyes filled with anger. Mulan scrambled to Sheng's side, keeping her sword steady in front of her.

Xianniang tilted her head. She pulled a dagger from her belt and threw it at Mulan. Mulan tried to block it, but the force of the dagger was great, and when it contacted her sword, the dagger sent the blade flying from her hand. The sword twirled through the air, end over end, before landing on the ground where it skittered across a thin crust of cooled lava that covered a nearby lake, like ice.

Panic washed over Sheng and Mulan. Their father's sword! They couldn't loose it. Mulan surged forward, Sheng pointing his blade at the witch. Mulan raced onto the lava crust. Like ice, it was slipperier than it appeared and Mulan instantly fell, the impact causing the surface to crack around her. Sheng knew that there was no way it would hold. Not for long. On her hands and knees, Mulan inched further out onto the crust as all around her more cracks began to appear.

The witch knocked Sheng aside, slamming him into a nearby rock. Sheng let out a groan as he slammed onto the ground, his vision blurry.

Behind Mulan, Xianniang stepped onto the cracking lava, her own steps so light that they left no impression on the thin layer of ash that covered the ground. Blood dripped from the wound that Sheng had inflicted on her palm, dotting the black with red.

Mulan let out a triumphant cry as she gripped her sword. She spun around, meeting the witch's gaze.

"Who are you" Xianniang asked.

"I am Hua Jun. Soldier in the Emperor's Imperial Army" Mulan shouted.

"Then you will die pretending to be something you're not." In a flash of silver, Xianniang threw another dagger. It flew through the air, striking Mulan square in the chest. Mulan was lifted off her feet and sent flying backward, slamming hard into a rock. She tumbled the ground, laying limp.

"No" Sheng cried in agony, a sob bursting through his lips.

He burst up from the ground, running towards Mulan. His boots pounded on the ground below. The layer of crust beneath him broke open. Sheng fell through the hole and into the lake below.

Chapter 22

[image]

Sheng's chest burned as he sank deeper and deeper beneath the Lake's surface. His hand, still clutching his sword, was frozen and he felt powerless. All he could do was sink, weighted down by the armor he wore.

He saw a flash of color, and then something dove into the water above him. At first, Sheng feared it was the witch, coming to finish them off. But as he watched, the shadowy shape took form, revealing itself as the Phoenix. Reaching him, the bird turned and wrapped its long tail feathers around his wrist, pulling him upwards.

A moment later, Sheng burst through the surface, opening his mouth and sucking in air. He lay on the hard ground besides the lake for a long moment, his eyes closed as his heartbeat slowed. He opened his eyes.

Instantly, he wished he hadn't.

There, protruding from Mulan's chest, was the witch's dagger.

It stuck straight out, the tip of the blade disappearing into Mulan's armor. But as he stared at it, expecting any moment for blood to pour from the wound, Sheng's eyes narrowed as Mulan pulled out the dagger.

He rushed to her side, staring in terror as she ripped open her armor, sighing in relief as it had embedded in not her skin, but in the leather binding Mulan had wrapped around her chest. He wrapped his arms around her, laying his head on her shoulder.

"Never do that to me again, little sister."

Mulan stared up at him, her eyes glistening with tears. "I could say the same." Mulan replied, her voice shaking with emotion.

"I guess we're even now." Sheng replied softly, his voice cracking. He shared a watery chuckle with Mulan as they laughed at his expense.

Slowly, Sheng got to his feet. Turning around, he saw the Phoenix sitting a few steps away. The bird's feathers were wet and she looked tired, but happy. Meeting her gaze, Sheng gave the Phoenix a grateful nod. The Phoenix had saved his life.

Mulan lifted her sword as she sat besides Sheng, her eyes lingering on one word. "True . . ."

True. Yes. It was the virtue they had struggled so much with, and yet the one they longed to embrace. And now, Mulan needed to be true to herself. They weren't going to listen to the witch's words or let their doubt creep in. Mulan needed to follow her heart.

Mulan raced over and jumped on Black Wind's black, Sheng following her, smiling as he shared a glance with her as he was perched atop his horse. Together, they raced across the valley in the direction of the battlefield. Mulan's armor, loosened by the fight, fell to the ground piece by piece. The wind whipped her long hair around her face. There was no hiding who she was now. But Sheng didn't care. They were done pretending. The witch had seen them as enough of a threat to try to *kill* them. They *were* strong. Mulan was no longer Hua Jun, Sheng's little brother. She was Mulan, Sheng's little sister. She was a woman. Mulan was a warrior.

As they reached the edge of the valley, they could hear the sounds of the battle from below the ridge. Riding over, Sheng pulled up his horse, Mulan doing the same with Black Wind. Below, the Imperial Army was trying, in vain, to keep the Rourans at bay. Soldiers stood back to back, their swords flashing in the sunlight as they struggled to fight the Rouran attackers. Arrows continued to fly through the air but they were being shot without intention as the archers simply tried to survive.

Above it all, Sheng and Mulan saw the witch, once again in her hawk form. She circled above the two armies, letting out menacing shrieks that encouraged the Rourans and made the Imperial soldiers shake in fear.

Sheng and Mulan didn't hesitate. Spurring Black Wind, Mulan raced down the hill, Sheng trailing behind, and right into the fight. As he went, he lifted his sword and swung. On either side of him, enemies fell as metal met skin. They didn't even notice the stunned looks of Commander Tung or Honghui as they caught sight of a powerful female warrior doing what none of them had been able to do--win. Caught in the moment, he appeared like a mirage through the steam that rose from the valley floor. His helmet covered his face slightly and his arms moved so fast they appeared to be a blur.

Reaching the heart of the battle, Sheng gathered his courage and pushed himself to his feet so that he was standing on his horse's back. He leapt off and flew through the air. For a moment, he hung, suspended, before landing on the ground, his sword raised in front of him.

Instantly, the Rourans rushed at him. Channeling his training and focusing on his chi, Sheng lost himself in the rhythmic swing of his sword. Around him, his little sister and the men he had come to know as friends fought valiantly. He watched Mulan in amazement as she cut through the Rouran soldiers, dodging their variety of attacks. It appeared to be something magical. Her arm was a blur as she cut through the Rouran soldiers. Honghui's sword dispatched two Rourans at once while Yao screamed and shouted, swinging his sword widely but effectively.

Inch by Inch, the Imperial seemed to gain a foothold. Whether it was the appearance of Mulan or just luck, it didn't matter. Inches were all they needed. With renewed energy, the soldiers continued to fight. Spotting the last large group of Rouran invaders, their arms heavy with sword and shield, Sheng and Mulan rushed towards them.

In a group, they turned to face both warriors. But Sheng and Mulan didn't slow. They kept running and just as it seemed she was going to collide headfirst with the remaining Rouran soldiers, he once again jumped into the air. His feet light and his mind focused, Sheng and Mulan raced atop the invaders, using their helmets and their raised shields to propel himself forward. In a flash, he had crossed over all of them and leapt to the ground.

Furious, the Rourans turned and started chasing after Sheng and Mulan.

Sheng and Mulan shared a small smile. This was what they had wanted. Sprinting toward the other edge of the valley, they ran onto a large rock formation. On the other side was a wall of steam. A gust of wind blew back the steam for a moment, revealing a large crack in the ground. Sheng and Mulan hesitated for only a brief moment before leaping. Behind them, the steam moved back over the ground, concealing the crack from view.

Behind them, the invaders' angry cries grew louder as they saw their prey disappear. With bloodlust in their eyes, they followed, running up and jumping off the rock. But their cries of anger turned to fear as they fell, one by one, into the deep crack just beyond the rock. The crack formed from the pressure of the lava, billowed steam upward as it pulled the Rourans down. In seconds, the invading warriors had been lost to the earth.

On the other side, standing with their swords raised, were Mulan and Sheng, ready for the next onslaught. Across the crack, the rest of the Imperial Army arrived, their eyes wide as they had realized what Sheng and Mulan had done.

Hearing the pounding footsteps of dozens of men, Sheng turned to see another group of invaders rushing at them from the opposite direction. Sheng and Mulan lifted their swords. But before the Rourans reached them, they came to a skidding halt.

Dozens of pairs of eyes landed on Mulan and Sheng and then peered into the steamy crag beyond. Sheng saw take in the Imperial Army standing behind him and Mulan, their swords high.

And then they turned and ran . . .

AN: Damn! This was a long chapter. About 1400 words. Stay tuned for the next chapter where we continue the battle between the Rourans and the Imperial Army, with Sheng and Mulan fighting alongside them.

Chapter 23

In the space that followed, the only sound Sheng could hear was the pounding of his own heart. They had done it! Mulan and Sheng had done it! They had defeated the Northern Invaders.

But their victory was short-lived. The Imperial soldiers had not even given a shout of joy before the shriek of a hawk pierced the air. Looking up, Sheng saw the witch circling faster and faster as he watched the invaders run like cowards. Sheng knew the witch was the real enemy. Reaching behind his back, Sheng grabbed his bow and notched an arrow. Taking aim, Sheng let the arrow fly.

The arrow soared through the air. Sheng held his breath and waited, Mulan watching his arrow fly through the air towards the witch, her expression holding anticipation. As Sheng watched, the hawk turned. For a briefest of moments, it seemed like Sheng's arrow would do its job. But just before the arrow hit her, the hawk transformed, splitting into hundreds of smaller birds.

They filled the air, blocking the sun as they hovered. Then, in one fell swoop, they moved in for the attack. Loud shrieks filled the air as the birds at the Imperial Army. The men ducked, trying to fight off the creatures. But the birds kept coming.

"Defensive position!" Commander Tung cried, his voice cutting through the shrieks of the birds and the men's screams.

As the soldiers gathered together, lifting their shields above their heads, resembling the shell of a tortoise. Sheng and Mulan scanned the horizon. Their eyes widened as they spotted movement on the ridge of the snow-covered mountain that dominated one end of the valley. Atop it, they noticed dozens of Rouran archers readying their bows. Their eyes grew wider as they saw a large trebuchet being moved into position. The wooden catapult would take out dozens of Imperial soldiers in a single shot. The slings could hold a huge rock or dozens of smaller ones. It was a power--and deadly--weapon.

The birds had been a diversion. The Imperial Army hadn't won. Not yet. There was a second wave being prepared--and it was about to attack. Trapped in the valley below, Commander Tung and his army wouldn't stand a chance against the wooden catapult.

Sheng looked towards Mulan, his eyes showing worry. Mulan's hand was lifted slightly. The mountain reflected back on her sword. An idea formed in his head as he stared at the mountain. He looked towards Mulan, sending her a nod. She returned his nod with a mischievous smile--one that suited her--and nodded back, showing that the same idea had formed in her head.

Using the distraction of the tortoise formation, Sheng and Mulan snuck out from the cover of the shields. Mulan whistled loudly and a moment later, Black Wind showed up. Mulan and Sheng jumped on his back, Sheng sitting on the back of the horse. Mulan turned Black Wind towards the ridge. As they galloped away from the other soldiers, Mulan reached down and grabbed an Imperial helmet. Sheng followed her lead, grabbing another and another. Satisfied, they continued towards the ridge.

Their last success had been lucky. But they were going to need more than luck to pull off this plan.

Chapter 24

[image]

Hidden in a high crevice with Mulan, Sheng looked down at the ridge where the Rouran army prepared their attack. As he watched, one of the men shouted orders, sending some soldiers toward the edge of the ridge with bows and arrows while others loaded a large, heavy boulder onto the trebuchet. Groaning with effort, the men moved it into position so that it was aimed at the valley--and the Imperial soldiers--below.

Taking a moment to make sure Mulan was ready, Sheng looked in front of him. The helmets Sheng and Mulan had taken from the battlefield were lined up in a row. Black Wind and Sheng's horse were safely hidden; out of harm's way. They were ready. Lifting his bow, he turned and took aim at the Rourans with Mulan.

His first arrow flew through the air alongside Mulan's arrow. There was a surprised cry as an invader fell to the ground. Then another. And another. It didn't take long for the soldiers to notice what was happening. One turned and Sheng saw him scan the ridge where they were hiding. Spotting the Imperial helmets, he let out an angry cry. Shouting new orders, he had his men turn their attention from the valley. The trebuchet was moved until it, too, was pointed toward the mountain where Mulan and Sheng stood, hidden from view.

At the leader's signal, the Rourans fired arrows at the row of Imperial helmets, unaware that they were nothing but empty shells, dummies to trick the enemy. When it appeared that the Imperial soldiers were unharmed, the Rourans grew angrier. Their attention turned to the trebuchet. Sheng and Mulan watched and waited, hoping that they had planned correctly and had fooled the Rourans.

A moment later, the group of invaders lit the fuel-covered boulder that sat in its perch on the trebuchet. Instantly, the boulder ignited, bursting into flame. The invaders released the trebuchet.

As the flaming boulder flew, Sheng held his breath in anticipation. The rock was huge and heavy, and even though it had been propelled with great force, it seemed to move in slow motion across the sky. For Sheng and Mulan's plan to work, they needed the boulder to fly strong and true.

Closer and closer the boulder flew until with a loud boom, it slammed into the snowy mountainside behind them. The noise of the impact echoed down the mountain and over the valley floor below. The Imperial Army, appearing as small as ants from Sheng and Mulan's perch high above, seemed to pause as the sound reached them. Sheng waited, listening. Mulan reached down and put her hand on the ground.

Mulan felt it. Just the smallest of vibrations, but it was enough to tell them that their plan had worked. Mulan sent Sheng a small smile. Not waiting to see the result of the avalanche that had already begun to roll from its peak, Sheng and Mulan took off running. Sheng stumbled, sliding down the hard-packed snow, the ground shaking more violently as the avalanche became stronger. Sheng heard the invaders' shouts as the rumbling grew louder, and then the shouts turned to terrified screams as behind him a wall of white appeared. It barreled towards them, unmindful of which army it destroyed in its path. The snow, long still, was now a freed beast, destroying anything in its way. Feeling the wind from the avalanche behind him, Sheng picked up speed. But the snow kept coming.

Sheng feared the avalanche would swallow him whole but before his fear come come true, he was grabbed and hoisted up by his shoulder. He looked in front of him, beaming as he saw he was sitting on Black Wind's saddle with Mulan gripping the reins.

Together, they galloped ahead of the avalanche as it nipped at Black Wind's hooves. Behind them, the invading army was not as lucky. Without horses and weighed down by the armor, they disappeared into the wall of white.

Sheng and Mulan didn't spare them a thought. They kept riding, worry and fear growing in Sheng's stomach. When he had thought of their plan, they had forgotten one vital part: that they couldn't control the snow. They had wanted the avalanche to take out the

enemy and it had, but they hadn't thought through what would happen after that. Now the snow was heading straight towards the Imperial Army.

And it wasn't slowing down . . .

Chapter 25

[image]

Mulan urged Black Wind on, the faces of the Imperial Soldiers growing clearer as they made their way further down the mountainside. Sheng watched in horror as the runaway trebuchet tumbled down, end over end, before landing with a crash--right on top of Cricket. Sheng's scream caught in his throat as he watched Honghui race over and push the trebuchet off of his friend. Shoving Cricket to safety, Honghui got to his feet only to be hit with a wave of snow that sucked him down.

Mulan slammed her legs against Black Wind's sides, yanking on his reins. She turned the protesting horse in the direction of the snow, Sheng's fear growing. He wasn't sure if they were going to make it out alive. As Black Wind struggled to move towards the direction in which Honghui disappeared, Black wind snorted with effort. He could barely stay atop the snow, and on his back, Mulan and Sheng struggled to stay atop him.

Suddenly Sheng spotted Honghui's arm reaching up through the snow. Extending his arm, Sheng managed to grasp Honghui's hand in his and then, with the last of his strength, he pulled him onto Black Wind's back, keeping a firm hold of him. He lay limp in the saddle, his eyes closed and his breathing shallow. Turning Black Wind once more, Mulan galloped ahead. As the land leveled out, the rushing snow began to slow, then stopped altogether.

The avalanche had ended.

In the silence that followed, Mulan brought Black Wind to a halt. Beneath them, the horse's sides heaved as he struggled to catch his breath. He had saved them--and Honghui. Reaching down, Sheng gave him a grateful pat on the neck. Then he slid down to the ground--along with Mulan.

With effort, they managed to get Honghui's unconscious body off the horse. Sheng watched as Mulan laid him down gently. Mulan

looked at him for a long moment, a ghost of a smile appearing on Sheng's lips. She placed her hand on his chest, his chest rising and falling. Sheng's smile grew as he watched Mulan smile fondly before she walked in Sheng's direction, giving Sheng a grateful pat on the shoulder. Sheng smiled before following Mulan, disappearing into the thin fog.

That had gone fairly well . . .

AN: Sorry for the short chapters lately. My motivation has been decreasing a bit but I am still enjoying writing this book. I'm very eager to reach the end since I have a good idea for the final chapters. We are about more than halfway through the movie and the action really is coming up in these next chapters. I'm very excited!

Chapter 26 (Honghui's POV)

Honghui's whole body hurt. Opening his eyes, he saw that he was lying near the rest of the Imperial Army. His head pounded, and when he went to stand, his legs nearly gave out from under him. The last thing he remembered was getting Cricket to safety. Then there had been a curtain of white. The next thing he knew, he was waking up on the ground.

But at least he had woken up. He had the oddest feeling, almost a memory tugging at him, that someone had helped him, though he knew that was impossible. Only the craziest of people would have run into that avalanche. Shaking off the thought, he made his way over to Commander Tung. As he approached, he heard Cricket calling out.

"Has anyone seen Hua Jun?" Cricket asked, his eyes scanning the area.

Hearing Cricket's worried question, Honghui saw Commander Tung take notice as well. His battle-weary eyes searched the men. Spotting Honghui instead, he called him over. "Have you seen Hua Jun?" Commander Tung asked.

Honghui shook his head, a pit growing in his stomach. Had Hua Jun been swallowed by the snow? Or lost to an invader's arrow before the avalanche had even begun?

One of the soldiers gave a shout. Turning, Honghui spotted two figures silhouetted in the distance. The fog made it hard to make out the details, but as the figures came closer, Honghui inhaled sharply. It was Sheng and the women warrior he had seen in battle. There was no doubt about it. Her long hair flowed out behind her as she rode across the valley atop her giant horse with Sheng.

"Black Wind?"

Hearing Cricket, Honghui turned, startled, to find the young soldier

now right next to him. He was staring at the warrior as well. *Black Wind?* Honghui repeated silently. What was Cricket talking about? Black Wind was Hua Jun's horse. His mouth dropped open as the rider burst free from the snowy mist and fog right in front of them. The horse she rode *was* Black Wind. Sheng was also seated on the back of the horse, standing tall, his expression emotionless. But if the horse was Black Wind, that mean the woman riding him was . . .

"Hua Jun?" Commander Tung said, putting a voice to Honghui's thoughts.

Sheng and the female warrior shook their heads in unison as they dismounted Black Wind.

"I am Hua Mulan," she said, her voice strong, steady--and feminine.

Honghui's head snapped back and forth between Commander Tung, Sheng and the soldier he had known as Hua Jun. The commander's face grew pale and the slightest of tremors shook his head as he stared at Mulan and Sheng. Honghui could see--and understand--the struggle Commander Tung was facing as he grappled with what was happening.

Mulan and Sheng saw it, too. Mulan straightened up, keeping her expression stoic while Sheng tensed, pressing his lips in a thin line. But Honghui saw the unease creeping into their bodies. Their shoulders fell just slightly; Sheng's hand quivered briefly. The proud warriors they had become was beginning to fade under the horrified gaze of Commander Tung..

Beside Honghui, Cricket gasped as he made the connection. "He's a *girl* . . .?" Cricket said, shaking his head in shock. The other soldiers mumbled and muttered under their breath as well, shocked by what they were seeing and hard-pressed to believe it. Honghui listened, his rage building. Hua Sheng and Hua Jun had lied to him. He, or rather *she* had been able to tell him what to say to a woman not because she had spoken to one, but because she *was* one! Sheng had just watched, letting Hua Jun's lie live. Honghui had allowed himself to be vulnerable in front of her, and she had beaten him in battle--more than once. His cheeks grew red as he remembered the

lake, a blush coating his cheeks.

Meanwhile, Commander Tung's expression had grown icy. "You are an impostor," he hissed, his voice heavy with disappointment. "You," Commander Tung began, his icy gaze set on Sheng. "You both have betrayed your regiment." Mulan and Sheng hung their heads in shame. Commander Tung went on. "You have brought disgrace to the Hua family."

His words cut through Mulan and Sheng like a sword through their hearts. Mulan's head flew up. There was nothing worse he could say. "Commander . . ." Mulan begged.

The commander didn't let Mulan finish. "Your deceit is my shame," he went on. "When we return to the capital, I will yield my command."

A shocked murmur moved through the soldiers. Resignation? That was nearly unheard of! Commander Tung's career spanned decades. He was one of the most powerful and well-known commanders in all of the Imperial Army. Yet he would turn his back on it because of Mulan's deception? The men looked back and forth between the three. Mulan and Sheng may have helped them defeat the Rourans in this fight but was victory worth losing their leader? As the murmurs grew louder, Sergeant Qiang stepped forward.

"What is the punishment assigned to these impostors?" he asked.

Commander Tung didn't hesitate. "Expulsion."

At this, the murmurs grew louder, horror mixing with fear at the very word. Honghui saw Sheng and Mulan shake their heads. Mulan took a step towards her commander while Sheng watched, his eyes calculating and fearful.

"I would rather be executed," she said, her eyes pleading with him to understand.

Commander Tung ignored her, turning his back to her. Sergeant Qiang, stepping forward, took a deep breath and as everyone listened, he formally sentences her. "From this moment forward," he

said, his eyes cold, "you both are expelled from the Emperor's Imperial Army."

As the sergeant's words slammed into Sheng and Mulan, their bodies seemed to shrink into themselves. Their eyes lost their light. Honghui watched, his emotions running rampant. Mulan and Sheng deserved this. They had lied to them all, put every single one of them at risk. Mulan had messed with his head--and his heart. But he still couldn't help thinking that they had been recklessly brave to do what they had done. To walk among the army and risk exposure at every turn. But they had done it. And they had excelled at it. They had even saved them. All of them.

Honghui shook his head, hardening his heart. It didn't matter. Not now. They had been expelled. They would spend the rest of their days alone and ashamed.

Mulan gathered Black Wind's reins and walked away, her gaze shifting to Sheng, holding a silent apology--and plea. Mulan was too ashamed to make eye contact with any of the soldiers. Honghui watched Sheng and Mulan go until they were just specks on the horizon. Hua Jun, he realized as he turned and made his way over to his comrades, was no more. It was as it should be.

But if it was as it should be, Honghui wondered, why did it feel so wrong?

Chapter 27

[image]

Sheng felt hollow. He moved, but without direction or purpose. Over and over he heard the word *expulsion* and saw the look of dissappoitment and disgust on Commander Tung's face, the look of betrayals on Honghui's.

Sheng had never meant to hurt them. He was only doing what he had to do. Keeping Mulan's secret safe. Yet somehow all along, he knew this day would come. One way or another. But for one brief, happy moment, as Sheng and Mulan had caused that avalanche to wipe out the enemy, they had felt strong, proud. They had felt like they could do anything.

But for what? Now they were expelled. They couldn't retreat home. They couldn't retreat to the army. They had nowhere to go. So they just walked. They left the valley behind, heading up into the mountains with Black Wind by their sides. He would always remain their faithful companion. With each step, the air grew colder and colder, but they didn't notice.

Reaching the edge of the cliff, Sheng and Mulan stopped. The whole of the world seemed to stretch out in front of them, the sinking sun setting the snow-covered ground aflame with reds and pinks. Sheng and Mulan stared at the beautiful sight, and their hearts broke further.

Sinking to the ground, Mulan allowed herself to cry. The sobs wracked her body as she wrapped her arms around herself, seeking comfort she could not find. As her crying intensified, she struggled to catch her breath, her chest heaving and tight. She felt broken inside, like a part of her had been shattered and would never be made again.

"What have I done?" she said, looking over at Sheng. Sheng sniffled, his face covered with his own tears streaming down his face. "We can never face our family . . . We can never go home . . ." As she

said those words out loud, a fresh wave of grief hit Mulan. She lowered her head. She was no longer the strong warrior she had become; she was a fragile, frightened girl.

As she sat there, she heard Sheng come closer. Sheng pulled Mulan into a tight embrace, swallowing the lump in his throat. They needed each other right now. Mulan tensed in his embrace; Sheng's embrace feeling underserved. She sighed softly, her chest heaving and falling, before accepting his embrace. Sheng would always love Mulan, no matter the path she took. She would always be his little sister.

For a long moment, Sheng and Mulan were still as their cries softened. As they managed to get their breathing back under control, a shadow fell over them. Sheng looked up, hiding Mulan's face in his chest. His eyes narrowed as he saw a group of black birds flying in formation. They swooped and lifted on the air currents in a beautiful--but sinister--dance.

As if on cue, the black birds flew straight down at them, and as they did, they transformed. Now in the place of the flock was the witch standing before them. Sheng and Mulan shared a look. Sheng sent her an encouraging nod. Mulan pushed herself to her feet. Sheng lifted his sword and summoning the little strength he had left, he met the witch's piercing gaze with one of his own.

"If you're here to kill us," Sheng said "I promise that won't be easy."

"Kill you?" Xianniang repeated, her eyebrows raising in surprise. She shook her head. "No. Your disgrace is worse than death."

The words were like a slap to Sheng's face. He tightened his grip on his sword, forcing himself to keep his breathing even and his expression calm. He didn't want to give the witch the satisfaction of seeing his pain, Mulan's pain. But he failed.

As the witch recognized Sheng and Mulan's agony, her expression softened. "I understand," she said. She paused. Her eyes grew thoughtful, as though she was lost in a memory. She directed her gaze towards Mulan. "I was a girl like you when my people turned on me."

In his hand, Sheng's sword trembled. He turned his gaze towards Mulan, seeing her defeated expression, he sent her a ghost of a smile. There was heartbreak in the witch's word. They held only truth. And for the first time since he met Xianniang, Sheng saw her as not a witch, but as a woman. He had been quick to assume Xianniang was a terrible person because she had aligned herself with the Shadow Warriors. But Sheng had not stopped to wonder why. Why would someone with so much power submit to Bori Khan's command? But here it was: Xianniang's own people had shunned her. Looking at the witch, Sheng realized Mulan and Xianniang had much more in common than he had ever known.

As if reading Sheng and Mulan's thoughts, the witch went on. The pain in her voice was mirrored on her face as she spoke. "I've lived a life of exile. No country. No village. No family." Pausing, Xianniang made sure Mulan was looking at her as she added, "We are the same."

"We're not," Mulan replied, even though the exact same thought had crossed her mind. "We can't be."

Xianniang shook her head. "We are. The more power I show, the more I was crushed. Just like you. You both saved them today--and still, they turned on you."

Sheng had felt like the ground beneath his feet had grown unsteady. What Xianniang had said was true. Commander Tung and the others, they *had* turned on them, despite everything they had done for them.

"Merge your path with mine," the witch said, watching as Mulan wrestled with her thoughts. "We will be stronger together."

Sheng grew hesitant as the seconds passed by. If Mulan accepted, Sheng would follow her. He would follow her anywhere she went. Even if this was the path she chose. A pit grew in his stomach at the thought of accepting the witch's offer. He knew it was Mulan's choice.

"You follow a coward--a leader who runs from battle," she said, breaking the tense silence.

Xianniang laughed. "Bori Khan did not run from battle!" she said. "That *coward* will take the Imperial City. And your emperor will fall."

The witch's words finally snapped Sheng and Mulan out of their fog. *Fall?* Sheng thought. What was the witch saying?

"That can't happen!" Mulan cried, strength flooding through her. She took a step forward.

"But it happens now," Xianniang said. Though she was using the words to gload Sheng and Mulan, there was a pain in her voice as she spoke, as if she didn't want them to be true. She took a step forward. "Join me. We will take our place together."

Sheng stared at the witch, his mind racing as Mulan hesitated. Bori Khan had disappeared. He had raced away, and his army had been defeated . . . hadn't it?

Suddenly, Sheng understood what the witch was saying. Bori Khan wasn't defeated. Leaving the others to fall had been the greater part of his plan. His disappearance was not a retreat. He was going after the Emperor himself!

Relief flooded through Sheng as Mulan shook her head. Mulan lifted her chin, transforming back into the same confident warrior who had defeated the Rourans on the battlefield only hours before. "I know my place!" she said. "It is my duty to fight for the kingdom and protect the Emperor!" Then she turned and let out a piercing whistle. As Black Wind raced over, Sheng leapt on his back, along with Mulan who was holding the reins. The sadness and despair Sheng had been feeling only a short time before was replaced with a wave of determination and anger. Anger at the thought that Bori Khan might succeed. Anger that the witch's words had, for the smallest of moments, intrigued him.

Mulan yanked on Black Wind's reins, looking back at Xianniang. Xianniang stared back, disappointment in her eyes. But there was something else there, too. Something that almost looked like admiration.

Without another word, Mulan and Sheng began to ride back down the mountain. The Phoenix let out a loud cry and flew into the air, following Sheng and Mulan.

"They will not listen to you!" Sheng heard Xianniang call after them. "It will always be a man's army!"

But Sheng didn't look back. Let Xianniang believe Mulan and Sheng would never find a place in the Imperial Army. Sheng and Mulan didn't care. All that mattered now was saving the Emperor.

And to do that, they needed to warn Commander Tung . . .

Chapter 28

[image]

"What is the meaning of this?"

Sergeant Qiang's voice boomed out over the camp as Sheng and Mulan raced into the middle of the gathered soldiers. Ignoring the sergeant's question and curious looks of the men, Sheng leapt off Black Wind and ran over to Commander Tung. Seeing his stern expression, Sheng slowed his steps, along with Mulan. When Sheng reached him, he bowed low. Then, looking up, he forced himself to meet his eyes. "Commander Tung," he began. "We must ride to the Emperor! His life is in danger!"

Doubtful murmurs broke out across the camp. The soldiers didn't believe him. Neither, it seemed, did Commander Tung. "Bori Khan's army has just been decimated. The Emperor's life has never been safer."

Mulan shook her head. "That's what Bori Khan wants you to believe. Please . . ." Mulan stopped and looked around for support. Seeing nothing but cold stares, she went on. "You have to listen to us . . ."

This time, it was Commander Tung who shook his head. "Only a foolish man listens to someone who's very existence is a lie."

Sheng winced slightly. A part of him wanted to turn and slink away. But if they left now, everyone would be in danger. The kingdom's future was more important then their pride. Taking a deep breath, Mulan pressed on. "At the battle, Bori Khan rode off with a small fighting force. At first, I thought he was a coward in retreat, but now I realize he was heading east towards the Imperial City." Mulan paused to catch her breath before plunging ahead. "This was his plan all along. While the army is focused on his attacks to the Silk Road, Bori Khan sneaks into the capital to kill the Emperor!"

Mulan stopped. Her words hung in the air, Sheng shifted nervously. Sheng saw the soldiers shift on their feet as they processed Mulan's

news. A few nodded their heads, realizing that what Mulan and Sheng suggested made strategical sense. If the Emperor thought he was safe, he would be an easy target. Sheng and Mulan turned back to Commander Tung. They could see the struggle on his face as he balanced his feelings of betrayal and his experience as a commander. Sheng knew the commander saw truth in their words. They just had to get him to look beyond their own lie.

"There is not an army in the world powerful enough to topple the Imperial City," Sheng went on, his words respectful but direct. "But perhaps a small, well-trained force could." Sheng paused.

"When employed correctly, four ounces can move a thousand pounds" Sheng and Mulan said in unison, looking at each other awkwardly.

Commander Tung paused. He looked at them and Sheng and Mulan could see him softening ever so slightly. They had not just been soldiers. They had proved themselves time and time again. They had been perspective students, willing conscripts, and brave warriors. He *had* to see that. He *had* to see past their single mistake--no matter how big it was.

"You would believe Hua Jun!" a voice called out, shattering the silence. "Why do you not believe Hua Mulan?"

Mulan and Sheng's heads whipped around. Their eyes scanned the crowd of soldiers watching them and Commander Tung. To their surprise, they saw that the voice of support belonged to Honghui. Looking right at Mulan, he nodded, and Sheng could've sworn he saw a glimmer in the man's eyes. Although it was the smallest of gestures, it was huge for Sheng and Mulan. Sheng sent Honghui a grateful nod, a small smile dancing on his lips.

"Mulan risked everything by revealing her true identity," Honghui went on, his voice growing stronger. "Sheng, knowing the consequences, supported Mulan." Honghui stared at Mulan, sending her a small nod. "She's braver than any man here." He stopped and turned to the other soldiers, daring them to defy him. Daring them to disagree.

Watching him, Sheng pushed down the lump forming in his throat. Despite their betrayal, Honghui was standing up for them. It was more than they could have hoped for, and the wave of gratitude that washed over them was immense. But it only grew as the other soldiers, following Honghui's lead, began one by one coming to their defense. "I believe Hua Sheng and Hua Mulan!" one said. "Yes!" another added. Sheng and Mulan's hearts soared as Cricket, Po, and even Yao added their own voices to the growing chorus of support. They were standing by Mulan; even without her disguise, they believed in her. It was more than Sheng could have ever hoped for.

But did Commander Tung?

Sheng and Mulan turned back to their leader. His face was unmoving, his expression impossible to read. For a long moment they stood face to face, neither speaking, neither blinking as around them the soldiers' cries dimmed.

"Bring me my sword," Commander Tung said. As Sergeant Qiang moved to do so, the gathered soldiers exchanged nervous glances. What was the commander going to do? In front of him, Sheng and Mulan braced themselves, prepared for the worst. "Hua Mulan," Commander Tung began, addressing her by her real name for the first time. "Your actions have brought disgrace and dishonor to this regiment, to this kingdom, and to your own family." Commander Tung paused, glancing at Sheng. When he spoke again, his voice was full of respect. "But your loyalty and bravery are without question. You will lead us as we ride to the Imperial City." Turning, he addressed the other soldiers. "Ready the horses!"

As the men jumped into action, filling the valley with the sounds of swords, Sheng and Mulan stood among their fellow soldiers. Sheng and Mulan had felt pride when they made it to the top of the shrine. And they had felt powerful when they had tricked the invading army and sent the avalanche careening down the mountainside. But none of that compared to what they felt now. They were going to save the Emperor. And not just as soldiers, but leaders, and most importantly--Mulan would be herself.

Chapter 29

Sheng pulled his new horse, Kage, to a stop in front of the Imperial Gates. They had ridden hard from the Mountain Steppe Garrison, and the horses and the riders were tired. But spotting the gates, opened and unmanned, Sheng, Mulan, and the other Imperial soldiers instantly went on alert. Sheng's body tensed and he felt his skin prickle. Something was wrong. Spurring Kage on, Sheng, Mulan and their fellow soldiers raced into the city.

Citizens jumped out of the way in fear and surprise. The soldiers didn't slow until they reached the main square of the Imperial Palace. As they entered the square, Sheng pulled back on Kage's reins. He slowed his horse and looked over his shoulder at Commander Tung. He met his gaze, his worry mirrored in Commander Tung's eyes. The square should not have been open. The gates shouldn't have been unprotected. Where were the men who were supposed to be guarding the Emperor and the Imperial Palace?

There was the sound of creaking wood. Whipping his head around, Sheng saw the gates to the square shutting. A moment later, the doors slammed closed. They were trapped!

"Ambush!" Mulan and Sheng shouted in unison, alerting the other soldiers.

Unsheathing his sword, Commander Tung yelled out orders to the other soldiers, moving them into formation. Just as he finished, dark figures appeared on the balconies that ringed the square. A moment later, the figures shifted and came into focus, revealing themselves to be Bori Khan's Shadow Warriors. They leapt from the balconies, landing on the ground with dancer-like grace, their swords already raised for battle.

Commander Tung turned to Sheng and Mulan. "Protect the Emperor!" he ordered.

Sheng and Mulan didn't hesitate. Jumping off their horses' backs, they raced across the square. Their arms whipped their swords through the air in precise and fluid motions as they fended off the attackers. Behind them, Commander Tung called for the others to keep their path clear. Instantly, Honghui, Cricket, Po, and the rest of the soldiers ran ahead to fend off the soldiers in Mulan and Sheng's path.

Clear of their attackers, Sheng and Mulan entered the palace in search of the Emperor. Quickly, they made their way to the throne room. As Sheng ran, he silently thanked Commander Tung for his leadership and preparation. Commander Tung had spent their journey describing the layout of the palace to them in case they were separated.

They turned left and right and then went up a flight of stairs, reaching the doors to the throne room. Pushing them open, they walked inside. The outside noises of the battle faded as the doors closed behind them. Spotting a figure on the throne, they hurried down the long room and bowed.

"Your Majesty," Mulan said, her racing heartbeat slowing when she saw their leader safe. "We are Hua Mulan and Hua Sheng from the Fifth Battalion. We've come to protect you."

"Impossible"

Sheng's head lifted in surprise when he heard the familiar female voice answer. Looking up, his eyes adjusting to the darkness of the room, he saw that it was not the Emperor sitting on the throne. It was Xianniang. The witch stared back at them. Then the women stood up and spoke again, her voice laced with disbelief. "A women leading a man's army."

Sheng's eyes narrowed. The witch could think what she wanted. The truth was Commander Tung, Honghui, and all the other soldiers had accepted Mulan. And they were counting on Mulan and Sheng now.

"Where is the Emperor?" Mulan said, unsheathing her sword and advancing towards the throne, Sheng following closely behind with

his sword raised.

But their steps slowed as they came closer to Xianniang. Pain and grief were etched upon the witch's face, making her sharp features oddly more beautiful. She looked vulnerable--and scared. Sheng and Mulan felt the urge to ask her what had happened. But they didn't need to. They knew without words, Bori Khan's victory might be approaching, but Xianniang was alone. In so many ways.

"You were right," Mulan said, lowering her weapon. "We *are* the same."

Xianniang gave Sheng and Mulan a small, sad smile. "With one difference, they accept you, and they'll never accept me." The witch's words were full of emotion, and as Sheng and Mulan watched, a tear dropped down Xianniang's cheek.

Sheng's heart ached for the women in front of him. Sheng had watched Mulan, the struggles she endured, believing that there was no place for her in this world. Yet, ironically, it had been Xianniang who had given Mulan her strength to embrace her true identity.

Mulan continued. "All along, you told me my journey was impossible," Mulan said, her voice softening as she approached the throne. Sheng watched on with immense pride for his little sister. "Yet here I stand, proof that there is a place for people like us."

"No," Xianniang replied, shaking her head, then bowing it in defeat. "It's too late for me."

Sheng watched as Mulan sheathed her sword, his worry growing. Mulan stood in front of Xianniang, unarmed and vulnerable. Sheng stood behind Mulan, watching Xianniang and Mulan's interaction.

"Please," Mulan said, breaking the silence. "We need your help." Mulan's voice, strong and proud, bounced off the walls of the throne room.

Xianniang took a deliberate step forward. Sheng's breath hitched. What was she going to do?

In answer, Xianniang let out a piercing shriek. Sheng's hands went

to his ears as he saw the witch drop her dagger and run down the throne stairs--straight towards Sheng and Mulan. Just before she slammed into Sheng and Mulan, Xianniang let out another cry and transformed into a hawk. Mulan ducked her head, avoiding the witch's path. Sheng snapped his head up, his eyes widening as he saw the witch barreling towards him. Just before the hawk crashed into him, it flew over his head. The gust of wind sent Sheng tumbling down the throne room stairs.

Sheng groaned as he reached the bottom, his body aching. His head pounded and his vision blurred for a fraction of a second Mulan grabbed his arm, hoisting him up and shaking off her worry for Sheng. He looked up, seeing the witch disappear from the throne room.

Racing after her, Sheng and Mulan burst into the hall and followed the hawk as it flew down the palace steps and out into the air above the Imperial Square. Their heads arched back, Sheng and Mulan tracked the bird as it continued out over the city and then turned, flying in the direction of the New Palace.

Sheng and Mulan gave chase. Below them, Commander Tung and his men fought, pushing back the Shadow Warriors. Sheng and Mulan clambered up onto a roof above the square. Their eyes locked on the hawk as they ran over the tiles. When they reached the end of one roof, they jumped onto another, making their way out of the palace and onto the tops of nearby houses. Their steps were confident despite the uneven surfaces and the buildings' great height. In no time, they reached the construction sight of the New Palace.

Only then did they slow. Leaping down onto the ground, Sheng and Mulan stood catching their breath as the hawk swooped into the west watchtower. The faintest of smiles tugged at their lips. In their gut, they knew. Xianniang had answered Mulan's call for help. Somewhere amid the construction was the Emperor--and Bori Khan.

Now Sheng and Mulan just needed to find them . . .

Chapter 30 (Xianniang's POV)

[image]

"Why are you here?"

Bori Khan's voice boomed with anger as Xianniang flew through the window of the tower. Scaffolding covered the inside of the unfinished building. The Rouran leader stood on one of the raised wooden platforms, the Emperor tied to a pole behind him. Transforming back into her human form, she approached the Rouran warrior, ignoring the daggers he shot at her with his eyes.

The Rouran leader had no power over her anymore.

"The attack has met a fierce resistance," Xianniang said.

Bori Khan's eyes widened in disbelief. "From who?" he snapped.

Xianniang almost smiled, but she kept her expression stoic as she responded, "A young woman and young man from a small village."

Bori Khan laughed. "A boy and a girl?"

Walking towards the edge of the tower, Xianniang looked out over the construction site. On the ground below, she could see Sheng and Mulan racing towards the tower. Mulan and Sheng were calm, composed, determination shining in their eyes. Turning back to Bori Khan, Xianniang shook her head. "No," she said "A *woman*. A *man*. *Warriors*." Her voice was strong and proud. "They lead a band of brave and loyal soldiers. The army is not far behind." She smiled as she saw her words make Bori Khan's face contort in rage. He looked out the unfinished windows of the tower as if he might actually see the army. Instead, he saw Sheng and Mulan making their way towards them--the warriors who threatened his plan.

"A woman leads their army," Xianniang continued, each word slow and deliberate. "And she is no *scorned* dog."

"You led her here," Bori Khan accused, turning back to Xianniang, sounding surprised.

"You shouldn't have trusted me," she said. The moment was an echo of their earlier conversation. Only now, it was she who held the upper hand. Because she no longer needed him. And he knew it.

Bori Khan's face grew red and his hands, hanging by his sides, shook as rage enveloped him. He reached behind his back and grabbed his bow, notching his arrow and aiming it right at the witch.

Xianniang didn't move except to lift one perfectly arched brow. "What makes you think that you can kill me?" she asked.

"I can't," Bori Khan replied. Fast as lightning, he turned and aimed the arrow away from Xianniang--and towards Mulan who had made her way inside, along with Sheng, the New Palace gates and stood on the ground below, "But I can kill *her*," he said, letting the arrow fly.

Xianniang watched the arrow move through the air as if in slow motion. Looking down at Mulan, Xianniang knew she could not let the girl die at the hands of Bori Khan. The Rouran warrior had been the last in a long line of people who had made Xianniang feel trapped, afraid to embrace the power within herself.

Xianniang had been right. They were alike. Mulan had hidden who she was, perhaps not in the form of a bird, but under the armor of a man. Yet she had ultimately embraced who she was and allowed others to see her true self. Mulan had done what Xianniang could never do: she had become free. If Mulan were to die now, everything she stood for, all she had fought for, would be ended.

Xianniang knew what she had to do.

Leaping into the air, Xianniang transformed into a hawk. With a flap of her wings, she put herself right in the path of the arrow.

The arrow slammed into her body, knocking her out of the scaffolding. Wind whistled in her ears as Xianniang felt herself fall.

Just before she hit the earth, Mulan's arms reached out and caught her. As Mulan lowered her to the ground, Xianniang transformed back into her human form. She looked up at Mulan and gave her a weak smile as she felt the life draining from her body.

Her head grew heavy and Xianniang let it fall back. As she did so, she met Mulan and Sheng's eyes, which were full of surprise and compassion. Sheng's eyes held an immense amount of gratitude and respect for the woman who lay dying in Mulan's arms.

"Take your place, Hua Mulan," she whispered. And then, with one last breath, her chest grew still.

Chapter 31

[image]

Sheng and Mulan stared down at the woman in front of them. In death, the witch's face looked peaceful. The thought brought some comfort to Sheng and Mulan. Xianniang had been many things, but she had, at her heart, been a strong warrior. She shouldn't have had to die. She shouldn't have had to suffer at the hands of Bori Khan for so long, just so she could feel accepted, But now, at least she was free.

Getting to their feet, Sheng and Mulan pushed away the surprising grief they felt. The best thing they could do for Xianniang's memory now was defeat Bori Khan and save the Emperor. Grabbing their swords, Sheng and Mulan raced through the maze of construction. Shafts of lights pierced the shadows and the wind blew through the beams and rubble, making a low hissing sound.

Sheng and Mulan spotted Bori Khan. The warrior's back was to them. He stood in front of a large open furnace. Inside, molten metal flowed into a huge tub, filling it with the red-hot liquid. Focused on the furnace, he didn't hear Sheng and Mulan as they approached. Taking advantage of his distraction, Sheng and Mulan scanned the area, looking for any sign of the Emperor. Their eyes traveled upward and stopped as they spotted him. He was tied to a pole and bleeding from several wounds, but he was alive.

Taking a deep breath, Sheng and Mulan tiptoed over to a low beam and hopped on. Then they climbed, using the crossbars that zigzagged over the room to get closer and closer to the Emperor. They were almost to him when a large shadow loomed over them.

Bori Khan was in front of them, blocking their way to the Emperor. In the shadowy light, he looked larger than life, like something out of a nightmare. His gaze trailed over them and they saw him sneer. "The *boy* and *girl* who have come to save the dynasty," he said, his voice dripping with venom and disdain.

Sheng and Mulan knew to Bori Khan they appeared nothing more than a young man and woman. But he was wrong. They were *much* more. Dropping into the warrior's pose, they lifted their swords.

"If you surrender," Sheng began, "I will assure you that your death is swift and painless."

In response, Bori Khan laughed. And then--he attacked. In a smooth, powerful stroke, he swung his sword down at Sheng. The move was so quick that Sheng barely had enough time to lift his own sword to block it. But the movement knocked him off-balance, and he fell. With a thud, he slammed into the beam below him, the impact knocking the wind from his lungs.

As he struggled to his feet, Bori Khan came after him, Mulan following behind them. Sheng scrambled backwards, jumping out of the way just in time to avoid his swinging sword. Creeping along the beam, he switched his gaze back and forth between Bori Khan, Mulan and the Emperor.

Bori Khan kept coming, his cruel laughter bouncing off the beams. His sword whipped through the air, and Sheng and Mulan somersaulted to another beam to stay out of his way. The metal clanged as his sword struck the beam where Sheng and Mulan had just been moments before. Taking advantage of the miss, Sheng and Mulan raced upwards and made their way towards the Emperor. They heard Bori Khan roar with rage as he gave chase behind him.

Beam to beam they went, with Mulan and Sheng barely staying ahead of the hulking warrior. But stay ahead they did, and soon they had reached the captive Emperor. The sound of metal on metal filled the air as Mulan and Bori Khan's swords clashed. Bori Khan swung again one last time and the motion was so powerful that it sent Mulan's sword flying out of her hand.

In horror, Sheng and Mulan watched as the blade fell down, down, down toward the ground and then, with a hiss, dropped into the burning red-hot liquid contained in the furnace. Sheng and Mulan let out a cry of despair as they watched their father's sword disappear, melting into nothing.

Sheng turned towards Bori Khan, who had risen to his feet. He ducked under Bori Khan's wild swing, but Bori Khan was faster. He delivered a strong punch to Sheng's face, the impact knocking Sheng off his feet. Sheng's eye ached and a familiar metallic taste filled his mouth. Blood.

"You are a mighty warrior."

Looking up, Sheng and Mulan met the Emperor's gaze. Even though he was trapped, he looked strong--and calm.

"Rise up like a Phoenix," the Emperor went on. "Fight for the kingdom and its people."

Hearing the beating of wings behind him, Sheng slowly rose to his feet and turned. He gasped as he saw the Phoenix appeared behind Mulan, it's wings spread. The Phoenix was beautiful. Magnificent. Strong. Her feathers nearly blinded Sheng and Mulan with their colors.

Filled with a renewed sense of purpose and power from the Emperor's words and the Phoenix, Sheng faced Bori Khan once more. The Rouran warrior hesitated for only a moment, surprised to see their resilience, and then rushed at them.

Sheng and Mulan raced to meet him. For a moment, it seemed as if they were going to crash headfirst. But at the last moment, Sheng and Mulan leapt. Soaring over Bori Khan, they landed on bamboo poles placed behind them. Balancing perfectly, despite the narrowness. Sheng taunted Bori Khan with a smile and a wink.

The warrior roared and swung his sword, slicing through the bamboo. It split in half, but that didn't stop Sheng. Sheng and Mulan leaped to another and another, jumping from pole to pole as Bori Khan continued to hack at the air wildly with his long sword. Reaching the end of the poles, Mulan lifted her arm in the air as one of the pieces of cut bamboo flew into her outstretched hand. Grabbing it, she jumped down to the ground and stood, the bamboo pole in front of her like a staff.

Sheng's breath came in gasps. He was exhausted. Every muscle

ached and even his bones felt sore. Sheng and Mulan had been fighting for so long. First to find their place in the army, then in actual battle against hundreds of fierce warriors--and now against the strongest Rouran warrior of all. Sheng wasn't sure how longer he could go on. But if he stopped, the Emperor would die, and what would become of the kingdom? Unbidden, an image of the tolou came to him. The peaceful village, full of the same families for generations. What would become of his home? Their family? Sheng had to keep fighting. Taking a deep breath, he leaped from the bamboo pole and stood alongside Mulan.

Once again, Bori Khan charged at them. Using the staff, Mulan blocked his sword and then spun, her movements fluid. The staff became a twirling blur as Mulan moved this way and that. Bori Khan tried to follow the dizzying movement but he stumbled. Taking advantage of it, Mulan stopped spinning and whacked him across the face. He let out a cry as his hand went to his cheek. Sheng flashed Mulan a bright smile, ignoring her grimace as she saw the blood dripping down his chin from his bloody nose.

Sheng and Mulan kept moving. Racing back in the Emperor's direction, they heard Bori Khan on their heels. Turning around, Sheng's eyes widened as Bori Khan's sword sliced down towards Mulan's head. Mulan cried out as her bamboo spear splintered, breaking into two as the Rouran's sword met wood and then continued down, slashing a rope that hung nearby. Without the rope holding it steady, one of the giant crossbeams pressed against the scaffolding came free. It swung back and forth in the air above, between where Sheng and Mulan stood and where the Emperor was imprisoned.

Watching the long piece of wood, Sheng had an idea. Mulan leapt for the crossbeam in an attempt to use it to get to the Emperor. But the beam was too high. Desperately, she grabbed at it and hung there, her arms wrapped around the beam in an awkward hug. With her added weight and the momentum of the jump, the beam began to tilt and spin.

Bori Khan, his face filled with rage, took a running leap and grabbed ahold of the opposite end of the crossbeam. The wood groaned under their combined weights as they hung on either end.

At the same time, Mulan and Bori Khan hoisted themselves to their feet on the beam. They swayed, their balance uneven as the beam beneath their feet rocked back and forth.

Sheng swallowed nervously, jumping towards the crossbeam. His arms gripped the crossbeam and he hoisted himself onto the crossbeam, swaying slightly. Bori Khan turned to face him, his face filled with rage. He looked back and forth between Sheng and Mulan, realizing he was trapped between them.

Peering down at the ground, which now seemed very far away, Sheng and Mulan took a nervous breath. Bori Khan was not going to stop until he defeated them. Sheng saw him begin to maneuver towards Mulan, Bori Khan's weight causing the beam to rise up behind Mulan, forcing her closer to the middle--and to the Rouran. It would only take one swing of his sword for Bori Khan to knock Mulan off. They had every reason to retreat.

But then, as if there was something in the back of their minds that kept reminding them why they had to carry on, they heard Commander Tung's voice in their heads, reading aloud the Pillars of Virtue. They heard the Emperor, urging Mulan to rise up like the Phoenix. They saw, in their mind's eye, the magnificent bird. And they knew, in that moment, they would not give up. Slowly, they bent their knees and lifted their arms, taking the now familiar stance of the warrior that Commander Tung had taught them. With their center of gravity lowered, their balance grew stronger. The room around them faded and they were back besides the lake, practicing the moves Commander Tung had drilled into the soldiers' minds.

As Bori Khan came at them, they moved backwards and forwards, pressing and yielding, all the while staying steady and focused.

Bori Khan on the other hand, grew less focused. As Sheng and Mulan deftly met every one of his moves, his face grew redder. His sword's movements became less controlled. Letting out a furious scream, he lunged at Sheng.

Sheng barely had to move. Using Bori Khan's energy against him, Sheng let him race by on the narrow beam, grabbing the sword

right out of his hand as he passed. When he stopped at the end of the beam, he turned, only to find the blade of his own weapon pointed at his throat.

Sheng tossed Bori Khan's weapon to Mulan. He grabbed the Rouran warrior, holding him in an unbreakable grip. He stared up at Mulan, seeing her stricken expression, he nodded.

Mulan leapt up, grabbing a rope that hung from the ceiling above. Then using the Rouran's sword, she hacked at the rope holding up the crossbeam. Repeatedly, she swung until, bit by bit, the rope began to fray. Then, with a loud creak, it ripped in two. Mulan leapt up, gripping the remainder of the rope in her hand. Pulled down by Bori Khan, Sheng leapt up, outstretching his own hand towards the rope. The rope slipped through his grasp.

He was falling.

Countless images flashed through his mind. His life. A thing he had sometimes taken for granted. He had never thought about death, he had been too focused on the task that he was to accomplish, but now, the only thought that filled Sheng's mind was death. The wind whistled in his ears and his limbs hung limp by his sides, his stomach dropped as he grew closer to his impending fate. He only hoped that Mulan would be fine. That was the only thing he was concerned about. He hoped that his family and little sister wouldn't be broken by his death.

Death approached him. Faster than it had ever done before. Sheng didn't want to die, yet, it seemed he had no choice in the matter now. He closed his eyes, accepting death, accepting his fate.

He could feel the ground come closer and closer. Sheng stared up, Mulan and the Emperor growing farther away as he fell through the air. The last thing he heard was Mulan's cry of despair.

His back collided harshly with the ground and then . . . Darkness. It engulfed Sheng. He could feel his whole body ache, succumb into the darkness that he was trapped in. Rubble collapsed around him, and dust covered his body.

Death. That is what Sheng felt . . .

Chapter 32

[image]

Sheng squeezed his eyes shut as bright light engulfed his vision. He squinted his eyes, feeling hands on his face. His vision was blurred and hazy. Soon, his vision cleared and he was met with the sight of Mulan, obvious relief on her face. Mulan held his face in her hands, tears staining her cheeks. The Emperor stood behind her, his expression concerned. His hands were folded behind his back as he towered over Sheng.

Sheng stood up to his feet, wiping the dust off of his armor. Seeing the Emperor, he bowed and lowered his head. The Emperor smiled at him.

"Tell me you name, soldier."

Sheng gave the Emperor a respectful smile. "My name is Hua Sheng. I am the brother of Hua Mulan."

'Time Skip'

The Imperial Palace was aglow. Hundreds of lanterns floated in the sky above as people filled the streets, their voices ringing with laughter and celebration. A parade, led by a large red dragon made its way along the main street while music and the scent of food filled the air.

Sheng and Mulan stood in the throne room, their minds a blur.

The past few hours had been surreal. Immediately after telling the Emperor his name, fear had filled Sheng. While they had saved the Emperor, Mulan had done so as a woman. And it was still illegal for her to fight as one. They had followed the Emperor from the New Palace to the Imperial Palace with lumps in their throat, convinced that the Emperor was going to punish them. But to their surprise, he had brought them to the palace to honor them.

Now they stood in front of the throne, tiny figures surrounded by dozens of candles that lit up the room, making it warm and bright. Behind them, the most important people of the city stood watching Sheng and Mulan intently. Among them were Commander Tung, Honghui, and the rest of their battalion.

Rising from his throne, the Emperor approached Sheng and Mulan. They bowed and smiled when he encouraged them to stand once more.

Hua Mulan, Hua Sheng," the Emperor began, his voice carrying over the large crowd. "The people owe you both a debt of thanks. I owe you my life. In gratitude for your service and dedication, I invite you to take your place among our greatest decorated warriors--as officers in my Imperial Guard."

Behind them, they heard the surprised murmurs from the onlookers. What the Emperor had offered was an incredible honor. In fact, it was the greatest honor any soldier could wish for. It took Sheng and Mulan's breaths away, and they had to move their gazes from the Emperor so he wouldn't see the emotion running down their faces. Unfortunately, when they turned, they found themselves looking at Yao, who had tears of his own running down his cheeks as he watched Sheng and Mulan with pride. Seeing the larger soldier weeping made Sheng and Mulan smile, and they turned back to the Emperor. They knew what they had to say.

"Your Majesty," Mulan began. "We are deeply honored by this immeasurable invitation. But with humble apologies, we cannot accept it." Once more, the room filled with surprised mumbles as those gathered tried to make sense of Mulan's answer. Only Sheng seemed to understand, and he gave her a reassuring smile as Mulan went on. "We left home under the cover of darkness and betrayed our family's trust. I made choices I knew would risk our dishonor. Since then, I have pledged an oath to be loyal, brave, and true. In order to fulfill this oath, we must return home and make amends to our family."

There was a pause as the Emperor considered Mulan's words. Then he nodded. Raising his voice, he formally addressed the court. "Devotion to family is an essential virtue!" As his scribes took note

of this new official declaration, the Emperor looked once more at Mulan and Sheng. He did not say anything for a moment, his warm eyes peering into Sheng and Mulan's souls. Then, as though satisfied with what he had seen there, the Emperor nodded again. This time, in a voice only Sheng and Mulan could hear, he said. "Very well, Hua Sheng and Hua Mulan."

Turning, he moved back to the throne. Dismissed, Sheng and Mulan made their way towards the soldiers--their friends. The night was young, and the celebration was just beginning. For the next few hours, Sheng and Mulan reasoned that they would forget their journey home and just enjoy life for a moment. They would have time to think about what to say to their family--and their father--later.

Dawn was beginning to brighten the edge of the Imperial City as Sheng and Mulan led Kage and Black Wind across a bridge towards the main gates. In the sky above, a few lanterns drifted aimlessly, while a boat floated in the empty water below. The city was quiet in the post-celebration hour, as was Sheng and Mulan.

"You can't leave."

Hearing Honghui's voice, Sheng and Mulan turned towards Honghui. Sheng smirked as Mulan approached Honghui.

"The Emperor gives his permission for me to leave," she said. "But you do not?"

"We've not said goodbye," Honghui answered.

"Goodbye, Honghui," Mulan replied.

"Goodbye, Mulan."

Sheng bit back a groan as he watched the lovesick duo stare into each other's eyes, both clearly wanting--needing--to say more, and yet neither wishing to be the first to do so.

Honghui outstretched his hand, staring at Mulan. "You still won't take my hand?" he asked. His voice was soft, deep with emotion.

Holding her breath, Mulan let her fingers curl around his. Sheng's grin grew as he watched them.

Mulan's head moved closer to his. Closer, and closer until she paused, her lips inches from Honghui's.

"I've never kissed a man before," she said.

Honghui smiled. "Neither have I."

And then, Honghui brought his lips to hers. As they kissed, their fingers stayed intertwined and Mulan sank into Honghui. Sheng bit back a sigh of relief as he watched the two. He had seen the connection between them and it was just a moment of waiting.

Mulan reluctantly pulled back, breaking the kiss. Her cheeks flushed, she brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes and smiled nervously.

Picking up the reins from where they had dropped, Mulan threw them over Black Wind's head. Then she jumped on the horse's back. Sheng and Mulan turned and rode away. But before they had even reached the gate, they heard Honghui shout. "I will see you again, Hua Mulan!'

"What about me?" Sheng murmured, sending Mulan a suggestive smile. Sheng's smile grew as Mulan blushed.

"You're never letting this go, are you?"

Sheng smirked. "Never. I'm happy you found someone."

Mulan nodded. "Me too."

"So, when are you two getting-"

"Stop" Mulan groaned, her cheeks painted a rosy red. "Don't tell Father and Mother."

Sheng shrugged. "No guarantees."

Mulan glared at him. "Mother is going to go crazy when she sees

you."

"What do you mean-" Sheng began. "Oh. My black eye and lip." Sheng paused, pressing his lips in a thin line.

Mulan nodded, wincing at the thought of the woman. "That's only some of your injuries."

Sheng scrunched his nose in distaste. "Yeah. My injuries aren't that bad, though."

Mulan tilted her head. "You have bruised ribs, a black eye, a busted lips, and some scratches and small cuts."

Sheng snorted. "Mother's going to go crazy."

Mulan hummed in agreement, turning towards Sheng. "If it helps, I have bruised ribs and some scratches and cuts."

Sheng shrugged. "Kind of helps, but not really." Sheng chuckled. "Still won't save me from our mother's wrath." Sheng whispered to himself.

A comfortable silence engulfed the siblings as they sat on their horse's backs. They were eager to see their family, but also fearful of their reaction.

With that, Sheng and Mulan rode towards their village . . .

Chapter 33

After much traveling, Sheng and Mulan finally rode into the village, their hearts pounding. They had spent the entire ride from the palace thinking of what they would say when they were reunited with their family, but now that the moment was almost upon them, fear filled them. What if they didn't want them back? What if they were already disgraced? What if they told Sheng and Mulan to leave and never return?

As Kage's pace slowed, Sheng saw villagers begin to enter the courtyard, curious to see who arrived. Spotting Mulan and Sheng, their faces filled with interest. The Matchmaker stepped out onto her front steps, her angry face still growing angrier when she saw Sheng and Mulan.

Stopping in the courtyard, Sheng and Mulan saw the door to their home open. A moment later, their sister rushed out. Upon seeing Xiu, all their fear vanished. Jumping down, Sheng and Mulan ran over to their sister and threw their arms around her. They were home.

Sheng and Mulan pulled back. Looking at Xiu, Mulan smiled warmly while Sheng sported a crooked grin. The younger girl looked . . . different. But then their sister spoke, and her warm, happy voice was the same. "There is so much I have to ask you!" she said, grabbing Sheng and Mulan's hands and squeezing them tightly.

Mulan laughed. "Tell me about you first," she said.

"I am matched," Xiu said, letting out her own laugh when she saw Mulan's surprised expression and Sheng's protective one. "You will like him."

"I am happy for--" Mulan didn't get a chance to finish as their mother plowed between her children, throwing her arms around Sheng and Mulan, embracing them. The older's womans arms shook

and Sheng and Mulan let the woman cling to them. No words needed to be spoken. Sheng and Mulan knew they had been forgiven.

But then, over their mother's shoulder, they saw their father. Zhou stood silently, leaning upon his cane. His expression was blank, his eyes impossible to read. Pulling free from their mother, Sheng and Mulan approached him. Once again, their hearts began to pound nervously. They had practiced their speech to him thousands of times, yet they struggled to find the words.

"Forgive me, Father. I stole your horse. I stole your armour . . . I stole your sword." Mulan choked on the word. Stopping, Mulan gathered up the courage she had found on the battlefield and went on. "And I lost the sword--it's gone."

"We now understand how much that sword meant to you." Sheng whispered, bowing his head in shame.

Silence fell upon them as Sheng and Mulan stared at their father, desperate to hear his answer. And when he spoke, his voice shook with emotion. "It is my daughter and son that means everything to me." As tears dropped down Zhou's cheeks, he went on. "And it was my foolish pride that drove you both away."

Sheng began to shake his head but stopped as Zhou held up his hand. He looked at them, taking in the warrior clothing that Mulan was wearing and the armour that decorated Sheng's body. He looked at the way they carried themselves, even when filled with emotion. He touched Mulan's hair, dropping it to her shoulder lightly and Zhou brought his hand up to Sheng's cheek, brushing his hand along Sheng's black eye. He nodded slowly, as realization of who they were, who they had become, dawned. "One warrior knows another," he said, his voice filled with pride. "You two were always there, yet I see you both for the first time." Reaching out, he pulled them into a tight hug. Sheng and Mulan sank into his embrace, finally feeling at peace.

As they stood there, their mother let out a happy cry and ran to thank the ancestors. Looking towards the shrine, Sheng and Mulan smiled as they saw the phoenix statue, its head leaning, the wing

crooked.

The moment was broken by a loud, nasally, and altogether unpleasant voice. Turning, Sheng and Mulan saw the Matchmaker making her way over. Sheng groaned quietly. "What does this woman want now?"

"There is not a man in this entire kingdom who will marry Mulan now," she sneered.

Mulan was about to protest when Sheng stepped forward, sending a heated glare at the woman, causing her to shrink under his gaze. "There is not a man in this entire kingdom who is good enough for Mulan. Mulan has done more than you ever will," he said, sneering back at her. Then Sheng turned his back on the Matchmaker, and he and Mulan went and joined the rest of their family at the shrine. Mulan straightened the Phoenix's crooked head. "Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for watching over us. Thank you for everything."

Suddenly, the sound of hoof beats filled the air. A moment later, the Emperor's banner came into view, whipping in the wind as the Imperial Guard cantered into the courtyard. The villagers gasped as they realized who the men were. Their village had never been honored by the presence of the Imperial Guard--until now.

Mistaking their appearance for danger, Zhou turned frantically to Sheng and Mulan. "Soldiers have come to punish you," he said. "You must hide!"

Sheng shook his head, smiling. "No more hiding," he said, grabbing Mulan's hand, walking over and waiting as the soldiers came to a stop. The leader removed his helmet. A smile broke over their faces as they saw who it was. Commander Tung looked down at Sheng and Mulan and nodded. Then he turned to their father. "Hello, old friend," he said.

Still not sure what was going on, Zhou stepped in front of Sheng and Mulan. "Tung Yong," he said, greeting the commander. "I am honored to receive you and the Emperor's guard. But if you are here to discipline Mulan and Sheng, you will have to get past me." His

hand tightened around his cane and he stood up straighter. Only Sheng and Mulan could see that his bad leg was shaking.

Commander Tung shook his head. "I do not believe that will be necessary." Looking over his shoulder, he signaled to one of the guards. Dismounting, the guard took two long, ornate boxes from the back of his saddle and brought it over. Commander Tung raised his voice so that the entire village could hear. "Under order of his Imperial Majesty, the Emperor, I present these gifts to Hua Mulan and Hua Sheng. They have brought honor to their ancestors, to their family, to their village, and to their country."

As the commander spoke, Zhou looked between his children and his old friend, struggling to process what was happening. All around them, the villagers watched with wide eyes and the Matchmaker, who had been listening most intently of all, fainted dead away. Ignoring the sound of the woman falling to the ground, the soldier presented the gifts to Sheng and Mulan.

Sheng and Mulan looked down at the gifts and back at Commander Tung. They weren't sure what to do. But at their commander's nod, Sheng slowly opened the lid. He gasped. Inside was an exquisite bow. Mesmerized, Sheng lifted it from the box and pulled it free from its container. It was magnificent, and in his hands, it was graceful too.

"As befits a great warrior," Commander Tung went on. "The sword and bow are marked with the Pillars of Virtue."

Zhou's eyes didn't leave his daughter's sword and his son's bow as he whispered the words he knew they would find there. "Loyal. Brave. True . . ." But as their weapons moved, Zhou's voice trailed off. There was another character etched onto Sheng's wooden bow. "What is this fourth virtue I see?" he asked, deeply confused.

Slowly, Sheng and Mulan ran their fingers over the inscriptions on their weapons. They read the word silently at first, and then aloud. "Devotion to family," they said in unison, the Emperor's decree now there as a permanent reminder of all they had given in honor of their family.

Dragging their eyes from their weapons, Sheng and Mulan met their father's gaze. He looked back at them, overwhelmed with pride. As they watched, he straightened up, standing taller than he had even when he was in the army. Besides him, their mother and sister stood with pride in their eyes as well.

"You have brought honor to us all," he said.

Sheng's breath hitched in his chest. It was all he had ever wanted to hear. It was the reason, he knew now, that he had fought so hard and it had been what made him find his chi and had driven him forward when he should have turned back.

Commander Tung's voice interrupted his thoughts, and he turned once more to look at the man who had helped Sheng become a warrior. He looked back at Sheng and Mulan with pride. "The Emperor urges you to reconsider his invitation to join our greatest decorated warriors as officers in the Imperial Guard. He eagerly awaits your decision."

All eyes turned to Sheng and Mulan, everyone curious to hear what they would say. From above came the sound of a powerful bird call. It echoed over the tolou, causing everyone to crane their necks to see what could have made such a magnificent noise. Sheng and Mulan smiled. They didn't need to look up to know what they would find there. But still, they lifted their heads. There, in the sky above, was the Phoenix. Her outstretched wings flashed in a rainbow of colors as she dipped and dove on the wind. When Sheng and Mulan saw the Phoenix, their smiles grew broader and more pronounced. Their friend, their guardian, had come to check on them one last time. Satisfied with what she saw, the Phoenix let out another cry, and with a flap of her powerful wings, she soared away.

Watching the Phoenix go, Sheng and Mulan whispered goodbye. They weren't sure where their journey would take them. But they knew now that they had the strength to do anything. He was Hua Sheng. She was Hua Mulan.

And they were warriors . . .

The End

The End